

“THE MASTER'S GAMBIT”

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This section rated: PG... There is some rough language in parts.

11 AM - Conference Room; Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; August 1, 1991.

“Thwack, thwack”

Albus Dumbledore's gavel struck twice on the table in front of him; bringing the room to order. There were over twenty five professors present – some new and some old – and every one of them was animated by the proposal that had been put in front of them as they had gathered.

There was a fair bit of interest in the 'why' as opposed to the 'how' of the proposal – even if each and every one of them had been recruited because of his or her awareness of the problems currently facing the wizarding community in Great Britain. As far as they were concerned, the purebloods in the UK were going to destroy the wizarding world if their attitudes weren't countered aggressively. That meant starting with their children – hence the proposal that was currently on the table.

“Before we start, is everyone in agreement that the situation is bad enough now that we have to do something drastic – even if we eventually do something other than what is not currently before you.”

There were murmurs around the extended table, but no outright disagreements.

“Good. Now what I have proposed is that beginning with this incoming class, we use the lunctus Animus ritual to help all of the first-year students find their bond-mates. The purpose of that is two-fold: (1) To give them something to live for and a reason to work hard, and (2) to diffuse the traditional house tensions that we've experienced in years past.

If there is a third reason, it is that the next generation of students is currently problematic. If the purebloods continue their current path, many of the Ancient and Noble houses will die out in two generations. There won't be enough children among the houses in order to produce heirs.

What I am proposing will solve those problems by giving every first-year child a chance to create a life-time bond and the hope for happiness that they might not have otherwise. To this end, I have sent private letters to all of the heads of houses whom we know to be either 'light-side' or neutral. I took the chance and reached out to the Greengrasses, Parkinsons, and Davises. I was delighted to receive cautious but favorable responses from them. Having already received complete support from the Lovegoods, Weasleys, Longbottoms, Creeveys, and others, I am confident that we can move forward without the kind of backlash that we might have otherwise received.”

There was a sudden explosion of conversation as the Headmaster's actions were revealed. The one person who said nothing was the deputy Headmistress. Severus Snape knew that she must be onto something, given the smirk on her face, and so decided to ask her the question that was foremost on everyone's mind. “Minerva? Surely you knew about this. What is the Headmaster doing?”

She reached out a hand and placed it on his. "Johan, it's alright. He knows what he's doing. Even you must remember that James and Lily's son turned eleven yesterday."

"No hesitation about the Headmaster's plan?"

"None, really. Having children bond at such an early age has some drawbacks, of course, but they're outweighed by the benefits. We're going to have to be very pro-active though in terms of counseling both the boys and girls about taking care of each other and what it means to be in such an intimate relationship."

"You're not the only one to express that, Johan. Your lovely bride said the same thing. So did Professors Sprout, Vector, and Dill."

He did a quick calculation regarding what that meant in terms of pure numbers. Unless he missed his guess, they weren't far from an absolute majority among the staff voting in favor of the plan as proposed, if it had caveats about how the first-year students should be treated after the bonding ceremony was complete.

"Glad to see that I'm not often wrong" he said, wryly.

Just as Minerva was about to launch into a retort, Dumbledore rose and looked around; commanding the assembled group's attention simply by reminding them all of his imposing height. "My friend, my companions...thank you all for at least hearing me out on this. I am sure that all of you harbor at least some private doubts and I want, as I promised I always would, tell you why I believe this is the right course."

He pushed back his chair and, walking behind it so that he could pace comfortable, pushed it back in, so that the arms of the chair slid easily under the table and out of the way. "I have been scouting the incoming class". The blank looks on the faces of the assembled group told him that the expression was lost on them. "Oh...I'm sorry. That's a Muggle phrase meaning that I have been reviewing all the likely candidates for Hogwarts – and not just consulting the birth book, but actually making quiet contact with my peers in other countries and talking to some of the teachers who handle magical children of that

age. There is a very good chance that we will have children from India, the United States, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, and Australia here this year as well and some of them are already showing amazing signs of promise. I believe that this class might be one of the most powerful classes Hogwarts has ever seen, in terms of sheer, raw power. Also, it may be one of the most diverse that we've seen in a long while – which also plays to our advantage.”

A voice from the back of the room spoke up and interrupted the Headmaster's train of thought. “Headmaster, you've still not told us why you want to have us help you perform a highly restricted bonding ritual on the first-year students.”

“Patience, Septima. I'm getting there and I believe that Minerva and Johan have already worked it out for themselves. It's simply this: Harry Potter is coming to Hogwarts.”

Those few words were all it took for the pieces to fall into place for the world-renowned potions master. “Harry?” He asked, excitedly.

“Yes, Johan. Harry.”

Johan Severus Snape sat back in his chair; a bit harder than he might otherwise have done. That Lily and James' son was coming to Hogwarts was something that he should have expected.....but somehow, he had lost track of the years and it had come as a surprise that it had been eleven years since he had been at Lily and James' side during the delivery of their only child.

Johan Snape was a soft-spoken, gentle, and understanding man who happened to be a complete genius at potions making and new-potions creation. His alter-ego, the hard-edged, irascible, and cruel 'Severus Snape – unrepentant death-eater' was how he met the world when he was trying to prevent the children of the other, surviving death-eaters from getting too close to him and discovering just how far away he had gotten from that persona.

“Johan” was the man he had really become – and the man that Pomona Pomfrey had fallen in love with over ten years ago. “You're looking pensive again, Johan. Knut for your thoughts?”

He turned to her and placed his free hand on hers. "I was just thinking how eleven years have flown by. I didn't expect it to happen quite this fast, somehow.

Meanwhile, the ruckus that kicked up in the conference room among the part-time teachers was amazing. Nearly twenty minutes passed before a general sense of order was restored and even then, the magical energy of the room remained high. "Ok, now that I have your attention again, the point I wanted to make is that Harry Potter is coming to Hogwarts and we have to do everything and anything within our power to make sure that he has the best chance possible of succeeding. I believe that the prophecy made about him will be resolved in Harry's favor ONLY if we give him something worth living for."

Dumbledore knew keenly of the private hell that was Harry's world and wished to God, for the millionth time, that he had given Harry to his Godfather, Sirius Black, when he had had the chance to do so. The words of James and Lily's will ate at him every day....and every day became a race against time to try to find an acceptable substitute for the blood wards that protected Harry's life. There had been no one left on Lily's side beside Petunia; a sister of very questionable character – since the Evens had been wiped out by Voldemort's forces early on in the first war – and the Blacks were unacceptable because of their overall associations with the forces of darkness.

He prayed that he'd not be called on the point, because having to confess his failings to them all would bring even greater doubt into the picture and they could ill afford to be battling internal dissension at the same time that they all, as a group, had to face the Ministry of Magic's yearly teacher certification boards while helping to manage the day-to-day running of the school. Fortunately, that point was allowed to slide.

Albus once again faced the group; taking a couple of steps to his right, so that all of them could see the lists that were magically appearing on the chalkboard behind the Headmaster's right hand. "I'm now putting up a list of the students whom I think are likely to attend Hogwarts this year. You'll notice that Frank and Alice's son, Neville,

will be attending, as will Xenophilius Lovegood's daughter, Luna. She's skipped a year and is ready to attend, even though she'll be not quite eleven on the 1st of September. I'm expecting Ron and Ginny Weasley to attend this year as well. Ron is a year older than his sister, but was held back a grade in primary school, while Ginny was promoted a grade because of her extra efforts. Ginny is someone we'll have to keep an eye on so that she doesn't get herself into trouble and so that she has all of the support that she needs."

"Headmaster?" Johan said, quietly.

"Yes, my friend?" Dumbledore looked down at his potions professor with a warm smile.

"You still haven't told us explicitly what you think the bonding ritual is going to do to protect Harry. I mean, beyond 'giving him something to live for'."

"Well, if I wasn't clear earlier, let me put it out this way". He scanned the room, looking to see which one of his colleagues was having the most problem latching onto the idea of having a school full of bonded young people – whose private affairs they could not disturb. "Harry Potter has not known much love since James and Lily were taken from him. It is my belief, as well as prayer, that among those who are coming to the school for the first time, will be a witch who is closely enough matched with him that they'll be able to form a bond. If we guide things right, there will be upwards of thirty-five - maybe even forty - new bonds established and some of those will be made by students who will come to support Harry in the struggle that he will someday face."

"You're taking a huge gamble, Professor. Not just that, but you're risking the happiness of many, many students in order to protect just ONE student. Are you absolutely certain that this is the way to go?"

"Am I betting a lot on this? Yes. Am I risking the happiness of all of them just for Harry's sake? No. There are other ways of helping him become the person that he's destined to be...but finding him someone who he can grow to love is a start. If it doesn't work the first time, there's always next year. Maybe we'll get lucky and maybe we

won't, but in the three instances where this was tried – right here at Hogwarts – it led to amazing results.”

Sweeping about, Albus Dumbledore looked into the faces of each of his colleagues and tried to discern for a moment if there was anything that he needed to uncover. Seeing nothing that alarmed him, he reached into the inner pocket of his work robes and drew out two individual pages. A bit of wandless magic turned the two pages into a stack of pages – one for each of the people present in the room, save for himself and the Deputy Headmistress.

“I’ve passed to you your assignments. The student named at the top of the sheet you’ve just received needs a personal visit and, in the case of the first-born children, an escort to Diagon Alley. Once you’ve completed your visit, I will need a complete report from each of you regarding the child’s overall well-being as well as his or her attitude towards school; a list of possible fears or dreams that we can help with; and the names of the child’s non-magical siblings if they’re not already known to us. You have ten days to complete this work and get the report turned in. I want each of you to take a full ten days off after doing so!! I need you refreshed, relaxed, and happy on September First. Any questions?” Seeing none, he said, “Dismissed”.

The meeting broke up; leaving the Headmaster, Deputy Headmistress, and J. Severus Snape sitting on the edge of the conference table, talking.

Minerva looked at the two men, wondering what each would say to the other. She had, of course, been in on the news that Harry was coming to Hogwarts, and so wasn’t surprised by anything that followed. She had suspected that the Headmaster might try something drastic – but she didn’t expect a unification or ‘soul bonding’ ritual to be the answer.

“Albus? Why are you sending me to talk to a muggle-born?”

Swiveling in his chair, the headmaster turned to look up at his life-long partner, lover, and friend. “Because she needs your guidance, Minnie. Ms. Hermione Granger is already exceptionally powerful. I tested her myself while she slept. Her parents, Jake and Miranda

Granger and I have talked and they told me a fair bit about Ms. Granger's early, accidental magics. They were impressive. Unfortunately, I felt the need to Oblivate them afterwards. I didn't want them to let on to Hermione that she had been noticed by us. Now, what she needs is someone she can look up to – like an aunt or a grandmother. I thought you'd be great in that role. Take her to Diagon Alley and then take her to lunch. I'd suggest somewhere other than the pub, of course. She'd get overwhelmed easily there, I think."

Not having anything else to say on the matter, the Headmaster turned to his other partner in crime. "Johan – I'm sending you to Harry. Yours will be the harder assignment, because you're going to have to restrain yourself from immediately killing his relatives. I would, if I were you, transfigure them into chairs or something for a while. It will do them good."

There was a wry, almost evil half-grin on the Headmaster's face as he thought of the School's potions-master having the pleasure of demonstrating just why wizards should be feared and respected – and why, specifically, they should have heeded the Headmaster's warnings about Harry's treatment when they had had the chance. He wished that his schedule would have permitted him to have the luxury of doing the deed himself, but he knew with the Ministry representatives coming for the annual inspection, that it could not be.

"Am I also to take him shopping, Albus? You know that is not my forte. Perhaps Minerva could accompany him also?"

"No, Johan, it needs to be you. You're going to have to explain to him what he's going to encounter this year and you're going to have to show him this side of you. More, you're going to have to tell him about his parents and what Hogwarts meant to them. I can't entrust this to anyone else. It has to be you. Besides, James will be laughing himself sick, wherever he and Lily are now, when he looks down to see you taking his only son in hand."

The idea of Johan Snape – the unofficial fifth marauder – teaching Harold "Harry" James Potter how to be the best, most proficient prankster in the history of Hogwarts did have a certain appeal. More, Johan Snape knew that Lily – the woman he loved – would have

approved. She married James only after his parents had forbid him from marrying her...but that loss had done nothing to stem the powerful love and friendship that had grown between them. The strength of his relationship with Lily was such that James had even confided in him, after his engagement to Lily had been announced, that he was certain that he, meaning Johan, would have made a better partner for Lily because of his greater devotion to his studies and the craft of potion-making. More quietly, James also told him that Lily still called out Johan's name in her sleep from time to time and that he expected that she would always do so; no matter how long she and James were married.

Johan had rebuffed James' claim, because it was both the politic and the kind thing to do – but never forgot it, either.

Even the Headmaster didn't know that just after Harry's birth, Lily had confided to him that their next son would have been named Johan Severus Potter, in his honor. Her death was the reason that he had devoted his life to being Dumbledore's spy within the ranks of the death-eaters and why he was looking forward to teaching Harry all he knew about potions. Lily's devotion and love for him during their years together at Hogwarts meant that he could do no less.

"I'll do it, Albus. Harry will be a potions-master by the time he leaves Hogwarts or I'll know the reason why not. You can count on it."

Reaching out, the Headmaster clasped his friends' arm in a show of support and friendship. "I know, Johan. There's no one better to do it, either. Thank you."

Sensing that the meeting had just ended, both the Deputy Headmistress and the potions-master bowed politely to the Headmaster and then left the room; leaving him to contemplate what measures he was going to have to implement in order to make the coming year the best that he could be, while ensuring Harry's complete safety. One thing was for sure: Albus Dumbledore was probably going to have to take up teaching again – because the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher was once again vacant - because Quirinus Quirrell had suddenly gone missing while on an expedition in Romania, and there were precious few people to fill the post who weren't already busy doing other important work.

As he sat, he reflected on the fact that it had been a long time since he had taught and he hoped that the old skills were not lost... and he wondered whether or not his potions-master would let the Dursleys live or not. Not that they deserved to live, but he was curious to know how much restraint Johan would have, after he found Harry.

I have much to answer for. I hope that he will forgive me for what has happened to him, once Harry's safely here.

57 Mill Lane, Nonington-in-Kent, Kent, UK – July 31, 1991

The rolling, gentle hills of Nonington-in-Kent hide beautiful homes and were perfect for farms of all kinds. Hermione Granger was at home in the hills – with her 10-speed bike and the companionship of her faithful Airedale Terrier, Sean, by her side.

On this particular day, the grey calico-colored tabby cat who watched the young girl prepping for a day out on her bike thought that the weather couldn't be better, nor the day more beautiful, to introduce her to the world that would become her home. No one else was around, nor was there another home for at least a kilometer in any direction.

In fact, the day would have been perfect, if the dog which had been roaming the property hadn't snuck up on her.

"Sean! Let go of that cat!"

Hermione Granger came running down the drive way, desperate to get to her dog, in order to make him let go of the cat that he had by the nape of its neck.

Finally, Hermione closed the last five meters between her and her dog. "Sean! Sit!"

Obediently, the brown-and-tan-haired dog sat, with the cat still firmly clamped in its jaws. If Hermione had known that the cat was not a cat, but an animagus, she'd have made the dog drop the cat immediately.

As it was, Hermione thought about how unusual it was for her dog to have caught the cat. It wasn't something he had done before.

Carefully, Hermione reached down and took the cat from his mouth. Other than the fact that there was dog-slobber all over its neck, the cat seemed unharmed. Deciding that it might be a wildcat, she put it down to see what happened.

Whatever she was expecting, it was most assuredly not having the cat suddenly morph into a tall, elegantly dressed woman.

Falling back, Hermione Granger found her footing and started to run towards her house and its (relative) safety. Sighing, the woman closed her eyes, disappeared, and then suddenly reappeared in front of the girl; effectively blocking her access to the house.

Holding up a hand, she looked at the young girl. "Please, Hermione, stop. I'm not going to hurt you."

Hermione's shock was complete. The very, very last thing that she could have imagined is that the cat-turned-person would know her name. She couldn't move, nor was she able to find any words to convey what she was feeling.

Sensing her unease, the Headmistress of Hogwarts closed the distance between them, so that they could meet eye-to-eye.

"Hermione Granger, my name is Minerva O'Shea McGonagall. I am the headmistress of a school in southern Scotland called Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Yes, I am a witch. You just saw me transform from a cat to a person. That is one of the magical skills that I have and one that you will learn, when you come to school."

Finding her voice, Hermione managed to squeak out "But I'm not a witch. I'm just a girl."

A broad, gentle smile played across the older woman's face. "You're a witch too; Hermione, or else I wouldn't be here. Haven't you ever noticed strange, inexplicable things happening around you? Did you not think that it was odd that your third-grade teacher's hair suddenly

turned blue one day when you were mad at her, and refused to grow back in any other color? Didn't you think that it was weird that all you had to do was think about your toys and they'd float over to you? Did you not notice that when those silly girls down the road splashed mud on you two days ago, it stubbornly refused to cling to your clothes and you were able to walk home completely clean and neatly dressed?"

"How long have you been watching me? How did you know all that?"

"We've been watching you for a long time, Hermione. Your magic is extraordinarily, even astonishingly strong - and amazingly so for a first-born witch. Albus Dumbledore, our headmaster, sent me personally to introduce you to the magical world and to talk to your parents about what's coming for you. My job is to help teach you in the next three days and to give you all the information that you could possibly want."

"Books?"

"Yes, books, Hermione. Amazing books, with pictures that move. There are even books that can get up and move on their own." Minerva shuttered at "The Monster book of Monsters", which some dingbat had actually bred by crossing the "Encyclopedic Book of Monsters" with a ferocious, magical wolverine-type creature. She thought privately that he must have been high on some Muggle drug when he had chosen to do so. It was the only way someone could have thought of creating such a god-awful thing.

Hermione's eyes went wide and the Deputy-Headmistress could tell that she had just found the young girl's 'On' button.

"I like books"

"I've noticed, Hermione. I've been watching you around-the-clock for the better part of the last three days and there's not a day that's gone by that you've not been to the library."

The young girl had the grace to actually blush at that.

“May I come in? I’d like to get off my feet for a few minutes and I could do with a glass of ice tea, if you have it.”

Hermione thought about that for a moment. Her parents had been very, very clear about her ever letting a stranger into the house and she didn’t want to disappoint them, even if the guest turned out to be magical and could do things she’d never dreamed of before.

“How about I bring some chairs out and I bring the ice tea out here. Would that be all right?” Minerva was not the best at legilimency, but she saw enough of the girls’ most prominent thoughts to know that Hermione had been asked not to allow strangers into the house when they were not there. Not wanting to give away information about her ability to pick up thoughts from students, she allowed the young girl to dictate the terms of their meeting.

“That would be fine, Hermione. And there’s no need to bring out chairs. I can conjure chairs right here, if you’d like.”

That stopped Hermione up short. “Conjure? You mean like summon out of thin air?”

Minerva nodded. “Well, it’s a bit more complicated than that, when you actually get down to it, but essentially, yes. That’s what I’ll be doing. Do you want to watch?”

Bouncing on the balls of her feet, Hermione nodded furiously. “Please!”

“Ok. Now pay attention. This is the first lesson in conjuration. You have to be able to see in your own mind what you want to do. What is it that you want to create? Once you can fix on the image in your own mind, you can put the magic to work to make it happen. I know what kind of chairs I want, so all I have to do is take out my wand and “Appareo!”

Suddenly, there were two comfortable-looking wicker chairs with down-filled cushions on the ground in front of them.

Hermione's smile was a mile wide as she contemplated what she had just been shown. It was as if a light had gone on in her head and suddenly, there were a million new possibilities open to her.

"May I try, Headmistress?"

That caught the Headmistress off-guard. She wasn't expecting that her new charge would want to try such a piece of magic immediately, but there wasn't really any harm in it either.

"Come here then, Hermione."

Hermione did as she was asked. Once she was standing next to the older woman, she started to feel a tingle all over. It was as if she had just made contact with something that gave off a low-level static charge. It wasn't unpleasant at all, but it was new and different.

"Take my wand in your hand. Feel its balance? Can you feel a tingle in your wrist or your arm?"

"Yes, but it's all over, and not just my arm. I felt it when I stepped close to you."

"Oh my" was Minerva's first thought. "If she can feel magic that strongly, then she may just be able to do this. We're going to have to watch this one very, very closely. I wonder if the Headmaster even knows how strong she is already."

"Good. That's very, very good. Now focus on the thing you want to conjure. Make sure you can see it; feel it in your mind."

"I can, Headmistress. It's my teddy bear."

"That's a good thing then. Let's try it on the count of three. We'll count 'One', 'Two' and then you'll say the charm. Do you remember what it is?"

"Yes, it's 'Appareo!'"

“That’s it, Hermione. Remember, you’re going to be doing actual magic for the very first time. It will either feel very, very good or it won’t, in which case, you’ll feel slightly sick to your stomach. I’m betting that you’ll feel very, very good after this. You are strong magically and this will help to start your magical core growing.”

“Ok? Ready? Remember...on three.”

Hermione tensed up a bit and then nodded. They counted together “One, two, “Appareo!”

The next thing Hermione knew, a powerful, almost orgasmic feeling swept through her whole body. The pleasure she felt almost caused her to panic, as it centered in her groin and in her chest. In front of her, when she opened her eyes, was her teddy bear, lying on the ground.

Bending over, she picked it up. It smelled perfect and was soft and furry, just like the bear that she loved so much. The smile that came over her face was priceless. She believed.

Minerva McGonagall stood back for a moment and thought about what had just happened. A first-year student had just performed a fifth-year, perfect conjuration...with someone else’s wand. “Oh shit” she thought, “How am I going to explain this to Albus? More, what am I going to say to the others? No one was expecting this.”

“That was very, very good Hermione. Even more so for a first-year student. If you’d been sorted into a house already, I’d definitely award you fifty house-points for that effort.”

“Does this mean that I’m going to come to your school?”

“Hermione, there is no way that you could be kept out, especially after that demonstration. I’ll be hard pressed to challenge you enough this coming year, if that’s what you’re already capable of doing.”

Hugging her teddy bear, she twirled around once and then sat down on one of the chairs.

Taking advantage of the break, Minerva McGonagall said “if you’re that pleased, would you be willing to go and fetch back the ice tea? I find myself parched.”

The look on the young girls’ face was mortifying. It was as if she had just been reminded of an enormous responsibility – where lives were on the line or something. She gave a small ‘eeeeep’ and then sprang out of her chair and ran to the house. Talking to no one in particular, Minerva said “Well, that settles it. She’s responsible, thoughtful, and powerful. No wonder Albus wanted her in the class.”

When Hermione returned a few minutes later, she was carrying a sterling silver tray laden down with cookies and a jug of ice tea; a small bucket, and two tall glasses. She set it down on the horizontal granite slab which sprang, perfect and gleaming white, from the ground. “Oh! Excellent, Hermione. That will do nicely. And it’s nicely presented. I’m sure that your mother would be proud of you.”

“Actually, Headmistress, my father is the cook in the family. He taught me about food presentation and how to treat a guest. My mother is good, but he’s better.”

That set the Headmistress back on her heels a bit. She didn’t expect such defensiveness from a young girl for her father. It was a welcome change from the typical familial relationships which she had seen in the wizarding world and bode well for her charge. She knew that usually, girls who like their fathers end up liking men in general and have better marriages.

“It’s nice to hear you speak so well of your father, Hermione. He must be incredibly proud of you.”

Blushing, Hermione said quietly, “He’s my best friend, Headmistress. I love him very much. He protects me and teaches me all sorts of things.”

“Tell me about them?”

That was the last word that the Deputy-Headmistress got in for the next half-hour. Hermione talked about her parents at length; making

observations about their relationship, their work ethic (which stunned Minerva), what she knew of their sex-life, and talked about the trips they had taken as a family.

Finally, she reached a point where she paused (for breath, Minerva thought). “Hermione? Which one of them taught more? Where did you learn to love reading so much?”

In retrospect, the question was so loaded that she should have known that she’d not get another word in for a long time....and she didn’t. It was a trait that she’d have to watch in class, lest Hermione be made outcast simply because she answered every question with an entire chapter.

“Hermione, you’ve told me a great deal now and I think I have a much better sense of who you are. What questions do you have for me? What can I tell you about the magic world that you want to know immediately?”

That was mistake number two. Questions there were...and they came fast and furious. For more than another hour, Hermione peppered the Deputy-Headmistress with questions about food, the other students, dorm life, the houses, uniforms, schedules, the library, and what happens during holidays. By the time it was over and she seemed satisfied with the answers she had received, two hours had passed.

Looking down at her watch – a Girard-Perregaux, 1928, diamond-encrusted platinum lady’s watch – she saw that it was almost four in the afternoon. Smiling, she looked up. “Well, Ms. Granger, it’s almost four now and I expect that your parents will be home soon. How would you like to play this out? Do you want me to change again and wait for them as I waited for you or would you like to save that surprise for afterwards?”

Hermione actually giggled – a soft, sweet sound that Minerva knew would enchant the boys at school. “Well, I think that my parents suspect that something is different about me, but they can’t put their finger on it. Why don’t you change, just before they get here and I’ll hold you in my arms. When they ask me where I found you, I can tell

them that you were in the driveway, and that I think you're special. You can do your change then. It will certainly 'break the ice' with them."

"Ms. Granger – if I didn't think that you belonged in my house – Gryffindor - I would most certainly expect you to be sorted into Slytherin house, for a move such as that."

"No worries there, Headmistress. I think I will like being in Gryffindor very much, if you're head of house."

Putting her hand on the young woman's shoulder, Minerva said more quietly "Don't get your hopes too high, Hermione. The Sorting Hat has a mind of its own – and I say that literally – and you can't always guess where it is going to place students. Now, I will tell you one thing that the other students don't know. The Hat will talk to you – speak into your mind – and tell you what it sees. You can ask it to put you into Gryffindor...but it will acquiesce only if it generally agrees that such a placement is best for you."

"Is that Hat alive?" she said, looking up at her knew friend.

"Well, that's hard to say. Magic is funny about preserving people's essence. You're going to find that the people in the pictures at school will speak to you, if you speak to them and by and large, they'll answer coherently and in a way that is true to the personality of the person who is depicted. The Hat, we believe, is a magical construct made by the four founders of the school: Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, Salazar Slytherin, and Godric Gryffindor. The Hat has been sorting students for almost nine-hundred and fifty years and in that time, the magic which makes it 'live' has never waned."

"How does it see into peoples' thoughts? How does it see their character or their desires?"

"Ah, Hermione. That's the true magic of the Hat. It does what no other magical item that I've ever heard of can do: It can see, for lack of a better term, your soul. Of all the magical artifacts that I've ever come across, and believe me I've seen a few, the Hat is the most wondrous and powerful. What makes it even more amazing, if that's possible, is

that during the rest of the year, the Hat talks to the Headmaster or spends its time making up the song for the next sorting feast. I suspect, though I can't prove it, that each new Headmaster or Headmistress gives the Hat vital new energies which keep it going."

Hermione was amazed by what Minerva McGonagall had to say and was soon lost in thought. She sat back and scratched Sean behind his ears, thinking about all the things she had been told and the amazing magic that she herself had performed just over two hours earlier. If her friend, Jeffrey, could only know about all that she had learned, then life would be amazing.

Thinking about Jeffrey – her first and best friend in primary school – brought a pang of fear and sadness to Hermione's heart. "Headmistress?"

"Call me Professor, it's easier and less formal"

"Professor? I can't talk about this with anyone else, can I?"

Minerva shook her head. "No, Hermione, you can't. There's a law – called the International Statute of Secrecy – which makes it a high crime to tell any Muggle, any non-magic person other than immediate family, about the existence of magic. Every magical person in the United Kingdom has, as his or her first obligation, the requirement to protect the knowledge of the existence of magic from the outside world. There are just under 100,000 of us here in the Kingdom, as opposed to over sixty million Muggles. We are so outnumbered that we have to prevent them from knowing about us, or else we could be easily destroyed. You cannot, ever, unless your life is in immediate danger, disclose the existence of magic to any of your friends – including Jeffrey. I'm sorry."

Hermione was very quiet for a long while after that, as she contemplated what joining the magical world was going to mean for her 'old' life.

"Professor? Did you ever have to make the choice to leave the Muggle world?"

“Yes, Hermione, a long, long time ago...and it wasn’t any easier then, either.”

Hermione didn’t know what to do, so she did what she had always done with her parents: She sought comfort and reassurance by hugging Minerva.

Putting a comforting arm around the girl, Minerva said to her “Shhhhh. It’s alright, Hermione. In the long run, you’ll find it’s worth it. There are things about the magical world that I cannot describe, but are more than worth it.” “If the ritual works as Albus believes it will, that is” she thought to herself.

“I hope so, Professor.”

At a quarter of five, a dark green BMW 3 Series Touring Sedan pulled into the driveway and two tall, striking people got out. Miranda Granger, younger than her husband Jake by seven years, was a lithe, brunette bombshell of a woman. At age 31, she had the body of a twenty-year old and moved like she was 18. Jake, for his part, stood 6’3, and easily commanded his compact, 102 kilo frame. With striking blue eyes, auburn hair and an easy, gentle smile, Jake Granger was the most popular (and most successful) oral surgeon for hundreds of kilometers in any direction. Having long since opted out of working for the National Health Service, he and his beautiful wife had created an amazing successful private practice. It didn’t take long for Hermione to run to her parents and hug them both. “Mom! Dad! Look what I found today! Isn’t she beautiful!” Hermione held up the kitty-cat that she had ‘found’ and showed her off to both of them. Once she was done, she said to them both (after putting the cat down). “Want to see what she can do? It’s a really neat trick.” “Sure, honey. Let’s see what tricks she does”, Jake said, not expecting anything much. Hermione smiled her private smile – the one that said that she had a surprise up her sleeve. “Oh Professor? Will you join us now?” The cat nodded and was suddenly replaced with the statuesque form of Minerva McGonagall. Miranda dropped her clutch purse and screamed. Jake took several steps back and looked all around, as if to wonder whether there were any more like her lurking nearby.

Calmly, the Deputy Headmistress put her hand out and said quietly “It’s alright. I’m friendly. No need for alarm.”

Jake reached out and pulled Hermione to him; roughly turning her around to face him. “Did you know about this? Is this your doing?”

Stepping back, and out of his reach, Hermione looked up and said angrily, “No, Dad, it’s not my doing. The professor here is from a school that wants me to attend this fall. It turns out that I’m a witch...and a powerful one, apparently. Professor McGonagall here is what’s called an Animagus – a witch who can turn herself into an animal at will. Her form is a cat, as you’ve just seen.”

“You sure this is no trick, Hermione. You know the penalty if you’re lying to us.”

“Dad, I’ve never lied to you, or to mum. I’m telling you the truth. Professor? Would you kindly send those chairs back to wherever they came from?”

“No problem, Ms. Granger.” A moment later, after a silent swish of her wand, the chairs just disappeared. With them went, at least temporarily, Miranda Grangers’ voice. The casual display of obvious magic had completely unnerved her.

Jake, though a professed Christian, still had to see and feel some things for himself before believing in them. This was one of those times. “Ah...Madame, if you could, would you please do that change that you just did. I’m not sure that I really saw it the first time.”

Professor McGonagall, having been through the same song-and-dance with the parents of prior Muggle-born students, took the request in stride. “Certainly. Watch closely.”

Centering herself for a moment, she drew out the time that it took for her to make the change into her cat form. Walking around for a moment as a cat and playing with her own tail for the comedic effect it would have, she gave them the full show of her as a cat. Once she was convinced that enough time had passed, she reversed the

change slowly and then straightened up, so that she was back to her normal posture.

“Well?” she said kindly, “Usually I get a round of applause for that change. There are not many wizards or witches who can do it as quickly or as smoothly as I can. It takes practice.”

“It’s bloody brilliant, Professor. I’d never, ever have believed it, if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes....but now....wow. It’s incredible. You said that there are others who can do the change, too?”

“Yes, the Ministry of Magic has a book which records all of the names of the wizards and witches who are capable of making the change into an animal. Right now, there are about 100 or so who can do it. That’s out of a population of just less than 100,000 witches and wizards in the United Kingdom.”

“Ministry of Magic? Really?”

She nodded. “Yes. How else would an autonomous group govern itself? The Minister of Magic reports directly to the Prime Minister, whoever he or she may be. Ours is a government unto itself – unless things get seriously out of hand and we have to ask for help. It’s been two hundred years since that last happened, but the option is still there. We’re loyal to Crown and country, just like you are, and some witches and wizards actually serve in the Muggle government and armed forces.”

Realizing that they were still standing in the driveway, Jake stopped for a moment and turned to his wife. “Mir, love? I think we’re going to be just fine. Let’s take this discussion inside, where we’ll be more comfortable. I think our guest here would like to sit down and perhaps we can learn a thing or two over dinner.”

Finally finding her voice, Miranda Granger looked at her husband, her daughter, and the tall, mysterious woman who her daughter referred to as “Professor”. “I guess so, Jake. It’s just taking me a moment to come to grips with all of this. It’s a bit to handle.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Granger, I’m sure you have lots of questions and I’ll do what I can to answer them. I’ve spent all of this afternoon talking to your daughter and showing her how to do her first bit of magic. You’re both going to be pleased with what I have to say on that subject, I think, and my guess is that you both want to know more about the world your daughter is about to enter. If we go inside, I can show you both some more magic, so you’ll have a sense of what Hermione here is going to be learning, and we can talk about the practicality of having a witch in the family.”

Jake pointed towards the side door and led the way inside, with Miranda bringing up the rear.

As she entered the cool, dark home, Hermione wondered how long it was going to be before her parents gave their blessing to her leaving home and going away to a school that none of them had ever heard of before. Her bet was four hours.

She was wrong by only twenty minutes.

4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey; July 31st, 1991; 5:15 Pm.

Johan Severus Snape hated babysitting. At least, he hated having to deal with snot-nosed children who were unwilling or unable to work up to their potential. It robbed him, he thought, of time that he could be spending with students who actually cared about learning and wanted to be in his class. He desperately hoped that Harry James Potter would be such a student. The unknown factor was what living with Muggles had done to him and what kind of attitude he had towards learning. That was the real key.

His current assignment from the Headmaster was as complex as it was emotionally laden. He was going to see, for only the second time in almost eleven years, the young man who had, he hoped, sent Voldemort to the hell he so richly deserved.

Apparating as far as Bog Lane; just off the A329, Johan Severus Snape looked around and then disillusioned himself for the half-mile walk to No. four, Privet Drive. The sun was still bright in the sky and there was a decent breeze, which made the afternoon cooler than it

might otherwise have been. Just before his arrival he had received a Patronus from the Deputy-Headmistress telling him that she had made successful contact with Ms. Granger and that she showed even more promise than the Headmaster had indicated.

The Potions-master had already become more than a little interested in what the future might hold for the incoming first-year students and then suddenly more so because of what she had told him in the short message. His thoughts, jumbled as they were, were betrayed in his increased pace as he made his way over and down the narrow byways towards No. four, Privet Drive. No one saw the consternated man as he made his way, carefully, between the rows of houses, and it was a good thing, too, because where he was going was a very, very closely guarded secret.

In reality, only four people knew of the location: the Potion-master himself; the Headmaster, the Deputy-Headmistress, and the Grounds-keeper, Rubius Hagrid. Johan Severus Snape – the second-most careful one of the group, thought that the number was three too many – but accepted the fact that the Deputy-Headmistress probably had a need, as well as a right, to know. He was much, much less sanguine about the Grounds-keeper knowing. Rubius Hagrid kept secrets the way that a strainer keeps in water...and that was being generous.

“That’s probably unfair to him”, he thought to himself as he walked. “So?” Replied the more analytical part, “Since when did we care what was ‘fair’ or not? Hagrid just can’t keep secrets. He wasn’t raised to do so and it’s just not reasonable to expect that he’d start doing so now.”

“Well then, all we have to do is keep him away from the ale at the Hogs Head Inn and we won’t have a problem. Better yet, keep him away from the Firewhiskey too, as well as the Stout and the Mead and don’t forget to remind the elves that they can’t help him procure any more and *then* we won’t have a problem.”

Snape snorted. Keeping a half-giant away from his drink was just as easy as keeping the Acromantulas out of the forest; which was to say

completely and totally impossible. "Might as well as try to bottle true love". Not going to happen, he knew.

Arriving at the front door of No. four, he looked at his watch. Twenty-five past five. "Not bad. If I play my cards right, I can be away and gone before sun-down".

Ringling the door-bell, Johan Severus Snape straightened up and waited for the one person he most wanted NOT to see again answer the door. Sure enough, a minute later, Petunia Evens Dursley answered the door.

Her first reaction was the predictable one. "You! How dare you come to my house!"

Snape's first reaction was also the predictable one. "Stupefy".

Thud.

"Much better. She always did look better when she was silent."

Stepping over the unconscious body of Petunia Evans Dursley, the Potions-master soundlessly entered the house, closed the door behind him, and looked around. Scanning for magical signatures, he found himself in front of the closet under the stairs. "Couldn't be", he thought. But, to his horror, it was. Opening the door, the black-haired man thought to himself "Lumos" and immediately, the tip of his wand lit up so that he could see everything within four feet of it. On the back wall, in unmistakable scrawl, were the words "Harry's room".

A fury such as he had rarely felt was beginning to gather in the pit of his stomach and he knew that he had to find the boy and find him quickly. Stepping back, and out of the small closet, Snape looked around and then laid his wand flat across the palm of his hand; thinking "Point me". It was not even a spell, really. More of a cantrip...but it served the purpose of pointing him towards the object of his search. Through the back door and out into the postage-stamp of a yard, Snape looked around until he found a small boy; thin and disheveled, bending over a perfectly manicured rose-bed.

As he looked down, he saw that the boys' hands were bleeding and realized that he was trying to wipe them off on his ragged, unkempt jeans. His presence was unnoticed until his shadow crossed in front of the boy. At that moment, he whipped around and looked up, frightened.

The boy started to raise his hands, to ward off....what? Snape wondered. "There's real fear there" he thought. A picture was coming together and it was a terrible, awful picture – one that if the Headmaster knew about, he surely would have done something about..."Wouldn't he?" Snape didn't know, but he hoped. The Headmaster was not a man given over to cruelty or abuse. In fact, Snape knew, the Headmaster was prone to quite the opposite and tended to be forgiving in even the more extreme circumstances.

"Come with me, Harry. I'll get you cleaned up and you'll be safe."

"Wh....Who are you?"

"I'm a friend of your parents, from long ago Harry. I'm here to help you and to get you ready for school this fall. You're going to be leaving this place tonight - soon I hope - and you'll never have to come back."

The boy brightened at that and started to stand up. That was the moment that the Potions-Master chose to look into the boys' thoughts. It was an unguarded moment, when the boys' attention was elsewhere.

Pain.

Sadness

The images came fast and furious and almost staggered the older man. Harry at five years old, being beaten for cooking the bacon too much; Harry being whipped almost raw for answering a question faster than Dudley; Harry being forced to take cold showers because Dudley had used all the hot water.

The injustices; the cruelty, the beatings....it seemed to go on forever.

Johan Severus Snape backed out of Harry's mind; unable to cope with the pain. Never, in all the times that he had been tortured by the Dark Lord, had he ever felt such sadness or hopelessness – and it was all contained in a little boy who had just turned eleven years old. The man feared by so many; the mask of Severus Snape, unrepentant death-eater, became real for a moment, as he promised himself that Petunia and Vernon Dursley were going to know pain. A world of pain and anguish such as they had never known before. Lily Potter's son deserved revenge and Lily would curse him forever if he stood by and did nothing.

“Stand for a moment, Harry. I'm going to help you now and you're not going to feel a thing.”

Taking out his wand again, Snape thought “Scourgefy”. That cleaned all the dirt from the baggy pieces of fabric which passed for clothes on the rail-thin boy. With a simple, wordless, “Evenescor!”, the grime and blood was gone from Harry's hands. A third swish of the wand and the clothes were mended and neat. Suddenly absent were the multiple tears, frayed seams, and broken belt loops. “One more, Harry, and I'll have you looking decent. At least, decent enough to travel. There's much to talk about and much to do, if you're to come with me to Hogwarts.”

“Hogwarts, Sir? What's that?”

Johan Snape was ready for the question and answered, with a soft smile, “It's the school in Scotland where your parents learned to use and control their magic, Harry. You're to come with me, if you want to learn how to control your magic and be the wizard that your parents knew you could become.”

The boy looked skeptical, as well as sad. “Sir? I'm just a normal boy...I'm no wizard.”

“Well Harry, your parents were James Harold Potter and Lily Evans Potter, and they were the best witch and wizard of their year. I should know. Your father, James, was one of my best friends, and your mother, Lily, was someone whom I loved very, very much.”

“You’re a wizard?”

At that, Johan Severus Snape actually threw his head back and laughed from the pit of his stomach.

When he was done, he looked at the boy. “How many times, in the last several summers, have your clothes suddenly mended themselves, or your hands and face become suddenly blood or dirt-free? Yes Harry, I’m a wizard. More, I’m the Potions-master at Hogwarts and I’ve come to introduce you to the life you’re going to live.”

“But...I don’t know anything about being a wizard. I...I have no money to go to some special school with and I don’t...” His voice trailed off, as he slumped, crest-fallen over the number of things that he thought would stand in the way of his leaving the Dursleys and starting somewhere new.

“It’s all right Harry. Your parents provided handsomely for your education and for all of your needs. You come from a family that is over nine-hundred and fifty years old!! Money is something you’re never, ever going to have to worry about, I promise you.”

Harry Potter’s eyes lit up. Money was something he understood, if only in its absence. He had never had the chance to do anything fun at all, nor buy anything that he needed, because his guardians had not permitted it, nor given him the quid necessary.

“You mean I have my own money? That I can use for things I want and need?”

Johan Snape nodded. “Yes Harry, you do. Lots of it. More than you can imagine, actually. More than I can imagine too, probably. You’ll see it too, when we go to Gringotts.”

“What’s it like?”

“So many questions Harry. I’ll tell you what. Let’s go inside and we can talk more there. Then I’d like to share some memories with you.”

As they walked towards the sliding glass door, Harry looked up at his new friend. "You said you were a friend of my parents, but you've not told me your name."

"I'm sorry Harry. You're right, I haven't. My name is Johan Severus Snape. I teach Potions at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I've been teaching there for more than eleven years. Actually...now that I think about it, it's been almost fourteen years."

He shuttered a little bit at the thought of how quickly the time had passed. "It seems like just yesterday that I was playing chess with your mother or Quidditch with your father. Those were easier days, Harry."

Once they stepped inside, Harry could see his aunt's feet sprawled out in the hallway. Running over to her, he felt to see if she was still breathing. He was about to pick up the phone and dial 999 when his friends' hand closed about his shoulder. "It's all right, Harry. She's just unconscious. She was a little upset by my presence and so I had to stun her. She'll come around in a while." "If I let her live that long." He mused to himself.

Unable to show the Potions-master up to his room, Harry decided to cover for it by offering some tea in the living room. When asked, Johan replied "Just some milk with it please, Harry. I never acquired a taste for sugar in my tea."

Harry laughed at that. "My uncle Vernon puts in five teaspoons. It's awful."

"How do you take yours, Harry?"

Harry looked down at the floor as he said quietly, "I don't know. They never let me have any."

That brought the Potions-master up short. "Sit, Harry. Now. In front of me, so that we can make eye contact. I need to know some things right now and I don't have time to play twenty questions."

Harry sat obediently and looked his new friend in the eye. "This is not going to hurt, Harry, but it might be disconcerting. You'll feel....pressure...for lack of a better term, in your mind, as I look at some of your memories. There are some things I have to know in order to make the right decisions. Once I'm done looking, I'll show you memories of your mother and father from when we were in school together. I'm betting, from what you've told me so far, that you know nothing about them at all, is that correct?"

"Yes sir." Harry said, almost ashamedly.

"Don't get down Harry. There's much to live for still." He paused. "Ready then? Let's begin. Legillemens!"

Suddenly, Harry felt a pressure in one part of his mind as Johan Snape pushed his way in, past the boy's natural defenses. Sensing that there was much to discover, he ranged his probe all over; gathering memories as he went. There was the glass wall in front of the snake at the zoo; being punished for trapping Dudley inside the cage and letting the snake out.

Talking to the snake!

Being chased by Dudley and his gang and then suddenly finding himself on top of the school...

Petunia cutting off all his hair and then finding it having grown back in by the next morning...

The beatings for peeing in his closet because they had locked him in...

The constipation because of not being allowed to use the toilet for days at a time...

The broken arm after Dudley hit him with the fire-poker...

A single, dirty sock for Christmas...

Birthdays forgotten year after year....

The scars on his back from being whipped with the riding crop...Vernon's leather belt

“NO MORE!” Snape roared as he backed out of Harry’s mind. Standing up, Snape took three strides before he was standing in the front hallway. Kicking Petunia Dursley, so that she was on her back, Severus Snape – the Dark Lord’s third-in-command – said “Enervate!” It took Petunia Dursley a moment of coughing before she was fully alert. “You! What are you doing here? Vernon with throw your arse out of here...”

That was the last thing that came out of her mouth before the pain came. “Silencio! Crucio!!”

She screamed. And screamed....and screamed...and no one heard her.

For almost thirty seconds, Severus Snape poured his hatred into making Petunia Evans Dursley feel the pain and rage that he had gathered from Harry’s mind. When he was done, she was broken - finally and completely. What was left of her mind wasn’t worth worrying about.

Snape raised her body up and then dumped her, unceremoniously, onto the floor in the living room. Her body was still twitching, but her mind was completely and irrevocably gone. There was no longer anyone home in the small piece of real estate which passed itself off as Harry’s aunt.

“Don’t worry about her, Harry. She’ll never bother you again. I can assure you of that. Soon, your uncle and cousin will join her and then we will depart this place for good.”

Somehow, Harry could not bring himself to care about the fate of his aunt, nor the impending fate of his uncle and cousin. He had hurt too much; for too long, to care about them. They had never cared about him for so much as a moment... and so he was beyond the point at which he could be convinced to have empathy towards or sympathy for them.

“Will they die, Mr. Snape?”

“Yes Harry, they will die. At some point, in about a week, someone will come looking for them because they will not have turned up at their jobs or at school. Their bodies will be found here in the living room, just as you see them right now. They will die peacefully...which is more than they deserve...and more than they would have gotten, if you were not here. What they've done to you deserves a much, much worse fate than the one I am giving them.”

“Will I be blamed?”

“No Harry, you won't be. You've not done anything to them. Neither the magical world, nor the muggle world will think you had anything to do with their deaths. It will be just one more 'tragic happening' in the life of Harry Potter.”

Harry thought about that for a while, before he said anything. “Mr. Snape?”

“Please Harry, call me Professor, or simple 'Johan', when were alone together. Mr. Snape sounds so....Muggle.”

For the first time since they had met, Harry laughed. Something about the sincerity of his new friends' tone-of-voice when he said 'Muggle' struck Harry as being very funny indeed.

“Is 'Muggle' a bad thing, Johan?”

The Potions-Master kicked Petunia's leg with his foot. “That's 'Muggle', Harry. The very worst sort: Uninformed, incurious, insular, pedantic, and parochial. Worse Harry, is that the Muggles think that they have the answer to everything and that there are no real mysteries left. They're wrong, of course, and we know that. I mean...don't get me wrong...some of their technology is amazing and really very useful...but on the whole, their very limited in their thinking. You're going to find that there are those in the wizarding world who discriminate against those who are born of muggle parents or who have one parent who is 'muggle-born' “

That made Harry scratch his head in curiosity. “What do you mean when you said ‘muggle-born’ ?”

“Good question, Harry. Muggle-born means anyone who is magic, whose parents are both Muggles. You’re going to have a classmate this fall – Hermione Granger – that’s like that. I was told this afternoon, before I got to you, that she is really exceptionally powerful. So much so that she might give our Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, a run for his galleons – which is saying something indeed.”

“Were my parents muggle-born?”

“Your father was not. He’s a ‘pure-blood’, but your mother was. The women in the Evans family had been giving birth to magical children once every two or three generations and so it was Lily, your mother, who was born of two parents who weren’t magical at all. For what it’s worth, Harry, I’m a ‘half-breed’ just like you. My mother was Eileen Prince – a ‘pure-blood’, but my father was a Muggle named Tobias Snape. It was a bad marriage and they ended up screaming at each other most of the time as I was growing up. It was, if anything, my mother’s fault. She carried her family’s prejudice about ‘blood-purity’ and what she was ‘owed’ by society because of it, into her marriage. I grew up confused and hurt by her comments towards my father, and resentful of my mother’s attitude because I thought she didn’t love me due to my ‘blood-status’. It was...painful.”

Harry looked at his new friend and did the only thing that he could think of: He got off his chair and hugged him.

It was at that moment; when Harry Potter showed his empathy towards a lonely, confused man, that the friendship between the two was sealed for good.

7:15 Pm.

Johan Severus Snape never expected that he would find himself in the position of being Harry Potter’s guardian angel, nor did he expect to have the young man show himself to be such an adept pupil. Within thirty minutes of seeing the abbreviated potions book that the

professor had brought for him, Harry Potter was already making connections and asking questions that were worthy of a fifth-year student. He had figured out, by comparing two of the potions in the middle of the book that Asphodel and Wormwood together made the most powerful sleeping potion possible. A bit of further reading taught him that Monkshood and Wolfsbane were the same thing; differing only in the time of year during which the ingredient was harvested. He also pointed out that by adding a tenth of a gram of pure sulfur to another potion, it might be possible to create a potion version of Fiend-Fyre.

The Potions Master of Hogwarts sat back, astonished. He couldn't believe that a young man, who had never before set eyes on a potions book, could create a new potion in a matter of minutes.

"Harry, you know that what you've just done would get you past your fifth-year tests and put you on the path towards your seventh-year exams, don't you?"

It was a rhetorical question, but he was trying to drive home the point that Harry was truly exceptional. "No, I didn't", Harry replied hesitantly.

"Would you like to have private lessons from me? I have just two slots open and I was saving them for seventh-year students who showed promise...but if you can keep doing like you've done tonight, I'll take you on and teach you everything I know."

Harry's eyes went wide. "Promise, sir?"

"Yes Harry, I promise. And please, don't call me sir unless we are in class together. It's really very impersonal otherwise." That earned him the second hug of the evening – and embarrassed him a bit, because he felt a tear accumulating in his eye that had not been there before.

"I'm sorry...Johan. I didn't mean to...."

"Don't worry about it, Harry. You've done nothing wrong. I'm very, very proud of you for what you've learned so far. If you can do as well in your other subjects as you've done here, it's going to be an amazing year for us both."

Turning, Snape was about to reach for his now-cold cup of tea when the door opened and in walked Vernon and Dudley Dursley.

They never had a chance. Before their coats were even hung up, they were both silently screaming and begging for their lives. It was a shame, for them, that those pleas went unheard.

Harry couldn't watch. Not that he didn't desire their deaths; rather he just couldn't stand to watch the veins throb in his uncle's forehead one more time. It was too much like the times he had been beaten for some illusory infraction and it was a mental image that he didn't want to have, so he found food for the two of them in the kitchen while his teacher 'took care of' the two portly problems.

What the Potions-master didn't count on were the blood-wards falling. He could actually feel them starting to melt away as both Vernon and Dudley Dursley experienced fatal coronary events and Petunia Dursley's body breathed its last.

"Harry, I didn't count on this, but the wards around this house are falling, even as we speak. I'm afraid we're going to have to move right now, if we're to get out of here alive. Is there anything in this home that you want to bring with you to school?"

Harry shook his head. There was nothing in the entire house that he wanted or needed – except for the candy-bars in the jar above the sink. Cleaning out the bowl of all four, he skittered around the corner to where his teacher stood. "Take my hand, Harry, and we'll go directly to our next destination. From there, we'll make plans, ok?"

Harry nodded. So far, Johan Severus Snape had been honest with him and shown him wonders that he could have only dreamed about...so he was excited about what tomorrow would bring. More, he was leaving behind nothing but cruelty and pain. Anything therefore, would be an improvement.

At the same time, far away in a tall, imposing castle in southern Scotland, alarms of every sort ringing in the office of the Headmaster and each one of them made the Headmaster smile.

The Leaky Cauldron; just off Charing Cross Road, London, UK – 7:48 Pm.

It had been a very long time since anyone named 'Potter' had entered the Leaky Cauldron. Therefore, it was no surprise that when Professor Johan Severus Snape suddenly appeared in the Bar's foyer, there was a stir among the patrons. Tom, the Inn-keeper, was the first to get coherent words together in greeting.

"Professor, what brings you here on a mid-summer's evening?"

It was patently obvious what had brought the professor to the Inn, but there were certain things that one was expected to say and do in polite company. "I'm here with a new student, Tom. Please, make a room ready for us. We'll be here a day or two."

Professor Snape – the professional persona – was all business. Brusque, cold, and sometimes callous, the public image helped keep certain kinds of inquiries at bay. This particular night was not one that he wanted to spend in discussion with the sheeple – a term that he and some of his fellow teachers used to describe the run-of-the-mill wizard or witch. "Harry, please follow Tom and head upstairs. I will have dinner brought to us and we can talk more in private."

Harry became, once again, the obedient student. "Yes, Sir. I will see you upstairs."

Harry turned and followed the elderly Inn-keeper upstairs to room No. 11, which was at the front of the hall on the right-hand side. Tom opened the door and let the young man in; knowing that the young man in front of him was the putative savior of the wizarding world, but unable, or unwilling to provoke the fearsome Potions-master by inquiring about more than he ought.

"Here you go, young master. There is a wash basin on the table and there are fresh towels behind the vanity door. If you need anything, please tap on the mirror twice and call out my name. I will answer as quickly as possible."

Harry had never heard of such a thing, but accepted that it was possible and said nothing about it other than 'thank you'. "I will let your professor know that dinner is served up until 10 Pm. and can be sent to the room directly."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate it". Harry said, thinking that it was somewhat odd that the man was being so respectful.

As the Inn-keeper was leaving the room, he turned and said quietly, "You are welcome, Master Potter...and thank you for what you've done for us all."

It confused Harry and left him thinking that something had happened when he was young that he didn't remember, but that others did. He made a mental note to ask the Professor about it as soon as he could.

While he was waiting, Harry took the time to look around the room. It had two full-sized, solid-oak beds – which were a huge step up from the ratty mattress and single sheet that the Dursleys had given him – and there was a full-sized vanity mirror plus a chest of drawers, as well as a small desk to write at. The south-facing windows looked out over Diagon Alley, but since it was dark, he could see not much more than the occasional reflection of the street lamps in the windows of the stores below.

He was taken in by the fact that he could feel something at the window-ledge. It was warm; fuzzy. It was almost like he was touching velvet or the soft fur of Mrs. Figg's cat, Mr. Tibbles from down the street. He couldn't see anything, but he knew that there was some force there. With his hands, he followed the flow of the 'fuzziness', to see if it had a border or where it went if it didn't. Slowly and carefully, Harry followed it up around the window; realizing belatedly that he was going to have to stand on a piece of furniture in order to do a full inspection. That he thought, after a moment's consideration, was something that Johan would probably not want him to do, so he stopped.

Just then, as he faced the window, the door opened and the Professor walked in, carrying a tray heavily laden with steaming-hot foods.

“Dinner, Harry. Come and sit. There’s still much to talk about and I’ve not yet shown you the memories of your parents that I promised.”

Just then, Harry’s stomach rumbled loudly. It had been early morning since he had last eaten and he was most assuredly hungry. “Thank you. I’m very hungry.”

“I can tell from here, Harry. Your body is crying out for something more than whatever you’ve been fed recently. It’s time to get you healthy and put some height and meat on those bones. Your father was almost a full two meters tall by the time he and your mother were graduated. At the rate you’re going right now, you’d barely make a meter and a half. Speaking of which, I have three potions for you tonight.”

Out of his inner-robe pocket, the Potions-master drew three stoppered vials. “Take the blue one first, Harry. It needs to be taken with food. The next one you’ll take an hour after desert, and the third one you’ll take in a couple of days, once you’ve had a couple of cycles of regular food. That one we’ll leave on the dresser, so that it’s not forgotten.”

Harry nodded and then pried the top of the first vial. “Drink it in one go, Harry. I’m not sure how the taste is, but Madame Pomfrey has never been overly concerned with how her potions tasted and it just can’t be that good.”

Smiling, Harry knocked back the contents; grimacing as the last of it burned his throat on the way down. Snape laughed as he caught the look on his charges’ face. He was completely familiar with that look and envied Harry not at all for it. “Eat now, Harry. I brought up some prime rib, gravy, potatoes, fresh bread, and some cranberry sauce because I figured this was a bit of a celebration for the two of us.”

Eat he did, in a way that he had never done before. For more than twenty minutes, Harry dedicated himself to tasting and savoring everything on his plate. When he was done, he looked up at the man he was starting to think of as an uncle or relative of sorts.

“Johan? May I ask you something?”

After wiping his mouth with the napkin from his lap, the Potions-master looked at his charge. “Of course, Harry. What’s troubling you?”

“Are you going to get in trouble for taking care of my relatives?” Harry placed a peculiar emphasis on the last word. “I don’t want anything to happen to you because of them.”

Severus was actually touched by the young man’s concern for him. “Thank you for thinking of me, Harry. That’s.....well, it’s very kind of you. To answer your question, I think I need to show you some memories. I want to tell you before we do this that some of the things I’m going to show you might make you scared and others....well....I don’t want you to misunderstand who I’ve been, Harry. I’ve done some terrible and cruel things in the past. You’ll understand, at the end I hope, why I’ve done what I’ve done. It’s not been an easy life.”

Harry looked at him and then nodded slowly. “You’ve been kinder to me than anyone else, Johan. I trust you.”

“You and who else, Harry? It’s a short, short list”, the Potions-master thought to himself sadly. “Well, let’s begin then. Come sit across from me and take my wand in your hand. I’m going to teach you what you need to know to see my memories. Tomorrow, or maybe the day after, we’ll start training you on how to keep people out of your thoughts. We can practice on each other and that way, you’ll know how much progress you’ve made.”

“It is important, Johan? If it is, I’ll do everything I can.”

Leaning forward and putting his hand on the boy’s forearm, Severus Snape said, “I know you will Harry. More, I know you’ll be great at it. But don’t worry about that right now. Let’s do what we need to do and then we can talk about what you’ve seen and perhaps, talk about more pleasant things – like what we’re going to shop for tomorrow in the Alley. There are lots of surprises waiting for you there.”

Harry's eyes lit up at the prospect of shopping for himself for the very first time. He had never, ever gotten to spend his own money on things that he, alone, would own and get to use and it was a thrill to know that he could do so.

"I'm ready, Johan."

"Ok, Harry. Here's what you're going to do. You'll hold my wand, so that the tip is facing me. At the time I tell you, you'll think about the word 'Legillemens'. Think of it as a command, as if you're telling the wand that command. Think about it in your mind – as if you're yelling the word. That will help to put your magical power behind it. If the spell works for you, and I'm pretty certain it will, you'll feel....well...a door, for lack of a better word, open in your mind. It will connect your thoughts to mind. I'll will help you through the door and draw you in. Once you're in my mind, I'll push the memories at you, one at a time. Can you do that?"

"I think so, Johan. I'm to take the wand in my hand, with the tip pointing at you, and think as hard as I can about the word 'Legillemens'. I have to do it like I'm yelling the word and push it at the wand. Is that right?"

"Very good Harry! That's it exactly. Now, shall we try it?"

"I think so, Professor."

"Good, let's do it. Here, take my wand in your hand and let's do this."

Over the next half-hour, they worked, back and forth, until Harry successfully entered his professor's thoughts. Once the contact was made, Harry took to it readily and the two shared thoughts of every kind. As promised, the thoughts that Snape showed him about the things he had done in the past were horrific and made Harry very, very sad. Snape felt his sadness and for the first time in a very long time, felt real shame for those acts. He also felt, perversely, a certain amount of joy that Harry didn't condemn him for the acts, but rather sympathized with him for having had to do them.

Severus showed him his relationship with Harry's mother, Lily, as well as his father, James and felt Harry's pride in being the son of two wonderful people. He felt his professor's profound sadness at not being able to marry his mother and some of the depression he carried with him after he was graduated from Hogwarts. In return, Harry showed his teacher the one memory of his mother that haunted him – of the night that his parents were murdered.

Suddenly, the connection broke and Harry felt alone. It was not a nice feeling. It was cold and uncertain and made him feel like he had accidentally crossed some kind of line or something.

After a couple of minutes, Severus Snape looked at his young charge and said quietly, "You did nothing wrong, Harry. I had to break the connection because of what you showed me. I'm not as strong as you are. I couldn't have lived with that memory the way you have."

Harry thought that was wrong. There was steel in his voice as he said, "You're wrong, Professor. You are strong. I could never have given up my life to do what you did. I couldn't leave the people I love and go around with people I hate."

If he had ever wanted to hug a student before, he had suppressed it – but he wasn't at the school and there was no one around to know anything. It was mutual, apparently. Harry leaned forward and hugged his new teacher and friend. "Thank you, Johan"

They broke apart eventually and the black-haired, publically-shunned potions-master looked at Lily's only son. "No....thank you, Harry. Thank you for trusting me and letting me share my memories without judgment. You know more about me now than anyone else. Please remember how precious and private those memories are."

Harry made a motion across his mouth, as if to zip it shut. "No one's getting anything out of me, ever, Professor. You have my secrets and I have yours. We protect each other."

Smiling, the Professor looked at him. "Exactly Harry. We protect each other."

Two things came of their conversation that night that neither had expected and neither was unwelcome. The solitary potions-master of Hogwarts gained a loyal and dedicated student; someone whom he could teach all of his skills and discoveries, and Harry learned just what it took to cast the Unforgivables.

It was something that came up the next morning, while they were eating at the table in their room. "Johan? Can I tell you something?"

"Of course, Harry. Anything."

"I learned something last night, and I thought I should say something first. One of the things that I learned from your memories was to...." Harry paused. He wasn't sure just how to say it.

"Out with it, Harry. Don't hesitate for my sake."

"I learned how to cast the Unforgivables."

That set the Professor back on his heels for a moment. It wasn't exactly a surprise, given the number of memories that Harry had seen in which the Unforgivables were somehow a focus.

Almost two minutes passed before the Potions-master spoke again. When he finally did, he seemed resigned. "Well Harry, I can't tell you, honestly, that I'm happy to hear it, but at the same time, I think you understand now just what the real cost is for casting any of them. They're not called the Unforgivables for no reason. If you're ever caught using them, it's a one-way ticket to Azkaban."

He could see the smile tugging at Harry's mouth and wondered what his soon-to-be protégé was thinking. "What are you thinking, Harry. Why the smile?"

"Well, I think that the active word in your last statement is that they have to actually catch you."

"Exactly, Harry. There's no instant alarm or anything that suddenly goes off at the Ministry of Magic which alerts them to the use of the Unforgivables. It's only if there's a witness or they perform a Priori

Incantatum on your wand which gives away the use of them can they actually prosecute you for it.”

Harry was lost at “Priori Incantatum” and told the Professor so.

“Latin Harry. You’ve got to study Latin. It means ‘prior incantation’ and it’s a spell we use to find out the most recent spells that were used though the wand. I’ll teach you how to do it – and the Headmaster and I will teach you how to do wandless magic so that this is not a problem for you. There’s no point in letting the Ministry control you any more than is absolutely necessary!”

“I’d like that, Johan. I want to learn everything I can from you. I’ll help you by doing whatever chores you need and when I’m done each day, you can teach me what I need to know.”

“Well, if that’s going to be our arrangement, then I’ll find some things that need to be done and we’ll trade. But first, we have to go shopping!”

Harry heard the excited emphasis in his teacher’s voice and his enthusiasm. “Don’t tell me you’re like my aunt and get wound up by clothes shopping. That would be just too scary.”

A deep growl rumbled from the Potions-master. “That will be five points from whatever misbegotten house you end up in, Mr. Potter, for your cheek!”

Harry almost fell out of his chair laughing at the sound of the gravelly voice and the obvious humor coming from his teacher. When he recovered, Harry looked up and with a grin said, “If you’re very lucky, Johan, it will be your house.”

The Potions-master clutched his hands to his heart in mock-alarm. “May Merlin protect me, Mister Potter. Slytherin House would never, ever be the same!!”

Harry laughed. “Nothing better then! We’ll upend them all arse over kettle.”

Holding his sides laughing at the trouble which Harry might cause inside Slytherin house, Severus Snape put his hand on the young man's shoulder and said, "You just might do that, Harry. You just might."

When they finally calmed down, Snape pointed a hand towards the closet. "Get a robe, Harry. There should be at least one there that's small enough for you. We'll get you dressed properly today, but first, we have to go to Gringotts and have you see your vault."

"I can't wait. I've never had my own money. Can I buy some chocolate?"

"Within reason Harry, within reason."

After Harry found a simple black robe with the Hogwarts logo in the closet; put it on, closed the cabinet, and walked back to his professor's side. "Ready, Johan."

"Ok, Harry. We're going to go downstairs and then through the back door, where the entrance to the Alley is located. There may be some people who recognize you and want to shake your hand. Be polite. Greet them, offer your hand, and thank them. Make sure you make eye contact. That shows respect...and gives you a chance to see if you can pick up any immediate feelings from them. It's not legilimency really, but it's close. However, it's legal and gives you an immediate advantage in dealing with them."

"I'll do as you ask, Johan."

"Oh...that's the other thing. You know that when we're in public, you have to call me 'Professor' or 'sir'."

"I assumed that was the case, professor."

"Very good then, Harry. You're as smart as your mother."

Turning, Severus Snape opened the door and the two departed.

August 1st, 1991 – 9:35 Am.

Down two flights of stairs, Harry and his master walked; finally coming to a stop in the foyer of the Inn. The Inn was quiet, but save for a couple of patrons sitting at the bar itself. Tom, the innkeeper/owner waved to them as the two walk quietly toward the back door which leads to Diagon Alley.

Snape guided Harry gently by the shoulder; directing him towards the door and then down and into the brick-lined alley between the Inn and the shopping area. The two stopped in front of the magical wall which served as a barrier to all those who didn't know its secret. The renowned potions-master took out his wand and tapped the bricks three times in order; counting three up and two across from the center brick on the left-hand most side. They rippled magically and shimmied out of place; forming a perfect Roman arch. The keystone above the arch was engraved with the words, "Veni, Vidi, Vendi"

"See, Harry? No problem. We've much to do today. First though, we're off to Gringotts. I want you to see your vaults and claim that which is yours."

There was a note of caring in the older man's voice that moved Harry in ways with which he was having a hard time coping. His whole life had been spent hiding his emotions and his fear – and suddenly, he was feeling...safe. At least, safer than he had ever felt before.

Feeling both magic and emotion pouring off Harry, the professor stopped and turned so that he was looking at his charge. "Harry?"

That was all that he had so say. Harry's thoughts were going a mile-a-minute and whatever guard he might have had, he let go of completely, so that Snape could sense what he was feeling. Harry purposefully made eye contact with his new mentor, so his intentions were understood.

The first probe; tentative and gentle, slipped into Harry's mind and Harry pushed his feelings towards it, so that the communication was clear. It didn't take long at all and soon the probe was gone.

Drawing his charge aside, into a shadowed overhang, Snape looked at him and said quietly, "Well done, Harry....and thank you." The last part he said very quietly and softly. It was as if he was acknowledging something important and memorable and perhaps it was. Harry could not have known that his new friend had never, ever expected to be in the role of a parent or guardian and was surprised by how quickly and immediately he had taken to it. Harry Potter, whether he knew it or not, had gained a guardian and a friend for life. Johan Severus Snape would not let any harm come to his new charge, from any corner. That much he was absolutely certain about.

Putting a hand on the boy's shoulder and making eye contact with him again, Snape said sadly, "Harry, we're going into public now. I have to be seen as a stern taskmaster and live up to my public image. You should take nothing seriously I say today while we are in public. I am now and will always be your friend and your protector. However, part of that responsibility means that others can't know...at least for right now....about our friendship. They have to see me doing the 'unpleasant' job of escorting you around the Alley. "

Harry nodded. "I'll do whatever you ask, Johan. I'm just sorry that they can't know we're friends."

"I am too, Harry. But there are still people who might try to hurt you because of what you did to Voldemort – Tom Riddle – eleven years ago. I have to protect you from them and the only way to do that is to make it appear that I'm still a death eater and still working for Riddle's return. I'm hoping that soon, I will be able to eliminate some of the immediate threats to you, but today is not that day and we must get your things for school together soon. There's a lot for you to learn and not much time to do it."

Harry felt sad, but determined. "I'll not let them come between us, Johan. You're my very first friend."

Harry's sincerity and the forcefulness of his voice made Johan Snape think that Tom Riddle had indeed signed his own death warrant the day that he attacked Harry Potter. "You're a credit to your parents, Harry. Don't ever forget that. Now come. We've got to spend and much to do. When we get among the crowds, I'll refer to you as 'boy'

or simply 'Potter'. If we get into real trouble, I will call you Harry. If you hear me use your first name, know that anything I say after that you MUST listen to and do as I say."

"I will, Johan. You can count on it."

"Let's go then."

The two turned and entered the Alley; emerging into the middle of the upper Alley, where the sun's rays had not yet reached. Many storekeepers were just opening up and few, if any, displays were outside. Harry could feel the same kind of tingling field that he had felt around the window the night before and wondered if what he was feeling was magic itself. He made a note to ask his professor about it later, after they were finished shopping.

They had just passed around a corner and were facing down towards the more sunlit part of the Alley when Harry looked up and saw the name 'Gringotts' in large, off-white letters which were carved into a granite façade. There were short, green creatures exiting and entering the tall, granite-and-wooden front doors. Harry tugged on his mentor's robe discreetly he hoped and then pointed toward the creatures. Snape looked down and said, sotto-voce, "Goblins, Harry. They run Gringotts. You don't want to run afoul of them. They have their own laws and domain and can make things very, very unpleasant for you if you cross them."

Harry simply nodded his understanding. He knew that there were lots of things for him to learn and this was one of them. They approached the front doors together and Harry reached out and opened the door on the left – holding it open so that his mentor could enter. Snape noted the small, polite gesture and nodded his appreciation.

The main hallway leading to the main foyer, where the commercial tellers resided, was decorated with the mounted heads of the previous Goblin clan-chiefs. Harry stopped to look at one and realized that the dates below the head signified the fact that the goblin in question, Silverclaw, had lived for over two hundred years – but had led Gringotts for only twenty of those years – the final twenty years. Out of curiosity, Harry looked at the next goblin clan chief and

realized that he, too, had died in office. It was obviously not a job that was great for the clan-chief's health!

"Come, Potter. We can't be all day here. My master has better things for me to do than to babysit you."

The words of his mentor brought him out of his reverie and would have stung, for their tone, had he not been forewarned that while in public, they were going to have to portray a much different relationship than what was the actual case.

Deferentially, Harry said, "Yes, Sir" and quickly returned to his mentor's side; matching him stride for stride. Soon they were in front of a goblin teller, Griphook.

Harry looked up at him in wonderment. Griphook had multiple teeth – many more than a human ever did – and was green-grey. He was about three or four inches shorter than Harry, though far sturdier and stockier in build. "Mr. Griphook, sir? My name is Harry Potter and I need to get to my vault. Can you help me, please?"

Griphook looked down, over the edge of the huge bank-ledger which covered his desk. It was the first time that any wizard that he could remember, had called him sir and had said 'please'. It was unusual enough that he was taken aback for a moment. "Well, Mr. Potter. You are an unusual one. I do believe that I can help you. Do you have your vault-key?"

Harry turned to his mentor, who quietly and quickly produced a small, golden key. "Here it is, Harry."

Harry took it and then immediately reached out and carefully placed it in the Goblin's hand. "Here it is, sir. I've been raised by Muggles and I don't know what to do or what to ask of you. Would you be my help here at the bank?"

He didn't know it, but he had accidentally elevated the head day-clerk from his staid position to that of advisor to the head of the third-oldest family in all of wizarding Britain. It took all of the goblin's reserve calm

not to immediately call for Ragnok himself; the current head of the bank.

“Mr. Potter, sir, if you want me to be your advisor here at Gringotts, I am pleased to do that. May I ask you if you’re sure?”

Grinning, Harry looked at him. “I think so. Have you ever lied to a customer?”

“NO, of course not!”

“Good. Do you want to help me?”

“Yes, of course I do. That’s my job.”

“Fine then. You’re the person I will come and see then, whenever I need help or advice.”

Taking out a small bit of parchment and a small, golden bowl, Griphook said, “I just need a small bit of your blood to make it official.”

Harry held out his hand, obediently, and let the goblin prick his finger with the very tip of a small knife that he had produce from somewhere in the desk. The two drops of blood fell onto the parchment which rested in the bowl and the entire bit flared to fiery life and burned red, and then gold, and then green. When it was done, the goblin extended his hand and Harry shook it.

“Would you please follow me, Mr. Potter? We have much to discuss. There are many things that you need to know today that can’t wait.”

Hesitating, Harry looked up at his mentor/friend. “May my professor come as well? I want and I need him with me.”

“Certainly, Mr. Potter. If he is a friend of yours, he is our guest and under our protection.”

Turning, the diminutive goblin led Harry down a side corridor and then down a half-flight of stairs, to an oak-paneled conference room. From

out of nowhere, a burly-looking guard appeared, along with another goblin.

Harry sensed that there was something distinctly different about this goblin. He could not put a finger on what was different...but he was sure that there was something special that set him apart from his fellows.

The older goblin made his way over to the table from the doorway and then sat in the plushest, most comfortable-looking of one of the chairs. Sensing their unease, or perhaps because of his many, many years of dealing with wizards, the goblin bid them sit.

Turning his attention to Snape, the goblin said, "My name is Ragnok. I am the current president of Gringotts. You are Johan Severus Snape – Potions master at Hogwarts, correct?"

Snape nodded. "That's correct."

"And you are Harold James Potter, also called 'Harry', correct?"

"Yes, I am" Harry said. His tone was neutral, but not unfriendly. He didn't know what he was dealing with and he could not read the goblin the way his professor said he might be able to during their talk, before they left the Inn.

"Well Mr. Potter. You've created something of a stir. By your actions today, you've elevated one of my day-managers to a position that he might not have otherwise had for another thirty to fifty years. It's going to cause some dissension in the ranks, as you humans say."

"That's not good", Harry thought to himself. "Johan said we were to keep a low profile. I hope he's not mad at me!"

Almost afraid to ask, but also afraid not to ask, Harry looked at the clan-chief and said, "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to cause any problems. Is there something you need me to do, to fix it or make it right?"

Ragnok threw back his head and laughed. “No, Mr. Potter. You misunderstand. There’s no problem that you have to fix. If Griphook’s service pleases you, then we are happy to have him be your assistant here at the bank. We’d much rather see you happy. You’re a very, very important client to us and so there’s no reason that you shouldn’t have the help you want here.”

Letting out a small breath of tension, Harry eased back in his chair for a moment. Snape put his hand on Harry’s forearm; catching his attention for a moment. “Well done, Harry. You made the right move. That was exactly the thing to say.”

“Mr. Ragnok, sir? My professor told me that goblins are very important to wizarding folk and that I should make friends with as many of you as I can. He told me that you’d help me and protect me, if I did the same for you. I’d like that, I think.”

The air was suddenly thick with anticipation. Harry wasn’t sure whether what he had just said was necessarily the right thing to have said and he worried that he might have gone too far in being honest. Finally, Ragnok sat up in his chair a bit straighter and looked at the pale, almost scrawny eleven-year-old in front of him.

“Mr. Potter, you have said some things about which I am positive you don’t have the full understanding. If you did, you’d know that what you’re offering is an alliance of sorts between the House of Potter and the Gringotts clans – which hasn’t been done for over five hundred years.”

Trusting his instincts, Harry looked at him and said, “Do you want to be my friend? I need friends right now and I’ll be your friend – and the friend of all goblins – if you’ll have me.”

Ragnok was not sure which surprised him more: Harry’s assertiveness, or the chance to align the bank’s interests directly with one of its largest share-holders. One thing was for sure: that the young man was right. It was better to have friends than not to have them.

“You’re a determined young man, I can see that. Very much like your parents when they came to us with the same offer before you were born. I wasn’t president then or we would have taken them up on the offer. Twelve and half-years of delay has caused nothing but problems – so yes, Harry, I think we will take you up on your offer of friendship.”

Harry rose and held out his hand to the Goblin chief. “Thank you, Mr. Ragnok, sir. I can go to Hogwarts knowing that I have another friend in the world.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Potter. I will have the papers drawn up and sent to the school. We can meet there and sign them when you’re ready. Now, in the mean time, I am sure you need to know about your inheritance.”

“Yes, please, sir. I have things I have to buy today for school and I don’t have any money.”

That earned Harry another laugh from the goblin-chief. “No money? Mr. Potter, I think you are in for a rare treat. Your parents, and your father’s parents, did very, very well indeed and have gathered a considerable fortune for you to use.”

Harry turned and looked at his professor. “How much should I take out?”

“Three hundred galleons should cover it, Harry. It’s not as if you’re going to buy a house today or are trying to go on a long vacation somewhere.”

They settled on three hundred and fifty eventually, given that Harry would probably want to have some Muggle currency as well, just in case. Presented with several large, magical ledgers, Harry was astonished to learn that he had, because of his parents’ sacrifice, a personal fortune worth one hundred fifty million galleons and properties worth another fifteen million galleons. When they finished examining the ledgers, even Severus Snape had to admit that it was much more extensive than he could have ever imagined.

“You did the right thing by getting a goblin to help you manage your money, Harry. It will be one less thing you have to worry about while you’re at school.”

“I don’t want it, Johan. I want my parents back!”

The tear that met the corner of Harry’s eye was proof enough for Severus Snape that the feelings were real and that Harry was unlike any boy he had ever met before. It was just one more reason to protect him and give him every chance to live the life that Lily would have wanted for him. Not knowing what else to do, Johan Severus Snape reached out and gave his new pupil a one-armed hug – and Harry responded by hugging him back. It was a simple thing, but he somehow knew that to Harry, it mattered.

“Harry, your parents loved you a great deal. The money aside, they left you memories and they gave you the best start they could. I doubt many other wizards have ever been so loved.”

There was nothing more to be said, really. The bank’s conference room was not the place, either, to explore the pictures and memories that Harry’s parents left for him.

“Come, Harry. We’ve much to do still. I doubt that you want to be shopping all day, even if it’s your first time buying things for yourself.” It was understood between the two of them that Harry had just been asked to gather himself and get ready for his next responsibility.

“I’m ready, Johan. There’s nothing more for me here today.”

“Very good then, Harry. Let us ‘face the mob’ again. Walk in front of me, but only a step or two. That way I can watch your back and make sure that you’re not surprised.”

Harry said nothing, but nodded slightly. It was same thing that Snape had asked of him earlier – but it didn’t bother him because it was said with something other than cruelty.

They left the bank considerably burdened by the ledgers, galleons, and private treasures from Harry’s family vault.

It had been a shock for Harry to stand among the 10 ft. high piles of galleons, sickles, and knuts that went on for more than twenty feet along the floor of the vault. Even the normally unflappable Severus Snape was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of money. However, it wasn't the galleons that really distracted him. Rather, it was the collection of paintings at the far end of the vault that drew the potions-master momentarily away from his charge. There, on magical canvass, Snape found her.

When he uncovered the portrait, he gasped. She was just as he had left her at the end of their seventh year together. "Hello, Sev. It's been a long time." Lily said to him, in that voice – the one that had entranced him so often. "What brings you to our vault? Wait a minute?! How did you even get in here?!"

It was so hard....so very, very hard to tell her. "It's Harry, Lil. I....I found him at your sister's house and he's with me now. Dumbledore gave me his key."

He had never previously thought that it was possible for a magical portrait to swear, but Lily's sudden diatribe was enough to make him blush.

"Albus!! You son of a bitch! I will skin you, I swear to god! I will kill him..."

It went on like that for some minutes, until Harry was distracted by the noise and came over to Snape's side, to see what was going on. When Lily, and then James, saw him, they burst into tears. It was more than their magical selves could bear. For the first time in his life, Harry got to hear his parents' voices.

Long minutes passed, while Harry and the magical reflections of his parents talked. Snape smiled as Lily admired her son and positively beamed when Severus told her about Harry's quick accomplishments in potions-making. "He's going to be one of my best, Lil. When he tripped onto adding sulfur to the potion for making Gubraithian Fire, I almost lost it. It was so simple...and it had been staring us all right in the face the whole time."

“Mom? What should I do now? Johan came to find me....” Lily raised one eyebrow at her son’s use of her former lover’s given name, “and then...” He paused. What happened to his aunt and uncle was not his to explain, he thought, and yet his mother deserved to know about her sister.

Lily’s ‘ghost’ – her magical portrait ‘shadow’ image – turned her attention to her former lover. “Sev? What happened? What did you do?”

Snape bowed his head. “I had to, Lily. Your sister and her scum husband tortured Harry. I had to deal with them.”

James looked at his son and then back at his friend; his face literally painted with anger. “Please tell me you hurt them, Sev.”

A flicker of a shadow of a smile crossed the potion-master’s lips. He said, very carefully and quietly, “Unforgivably”.

James looked at him and then at Harry, to see if there was a reaction one way or the other, and then replied in the same voice. “Good, Sev, good. Harry deserved better than to be left with them.”

“Never again, James, my old friend. I will find Remus and we will find a way to liberate Padfoot. Your son deserves that.”

“Liberate? What do you mean?”

Johan Severus Snape was horrified that he was the one who was going to have to tell two of his best friends that they had been betrayed by one of the marauders. “Wormtail betrayed you both...”

Lily’s reaction was so vehement that Snape thought that he had actually felt her intake of breath – something that he knew was physically impossible – but somehow had been real, none-the-less. After taking a calming breath, the potions-master and friend to the infamous marauders went on. “Wormtail sold you out to Tom and Padfoot went looking for him. He was going to kill him...but Wormtail got the better of him and escaped. He’s been living, I think, as a rat

somewhere. I've never been able to find him, though I've looked. Padfoot was sent to Azkaban – without trial - for his 'murder', along with the deaths of 13 Muggles who were too close by at the time. Padfoot's still there and I want to get him out."

James was first to react. "Harry. Listen to me. Use whatever gold is here...I don't care if it takes all of it...Use it to get Padfoot free - even if you have to move Heaven and Earth to do it. Padfoot loves you and we loved him. He doesn't deserve to rot in that hell-hole."

Harry nodded. "His first burden", Snape thought to himself, sadly. "I will help in whatever way I can, James. Your son will NOT be alone."

The Son of Prongs looked at the painted images of his parents and somehow knew that they were longing, desperately, to hug their friend. It wasn't something he consciously knew, but it was that sense...the one that tells a person what another is feeling and is not often wrong.

He looked at his parents and said what he had always known was true, "I love you, Mom, Dad."

Then Johan Severus Snape saw the impossible; the improbable, and the unspeakable thing happen. A lone hand pushed its way up from each of the paintings – up and out. They were hands made flesh by the miracle that is love. Harry raced forward; grasped the hands and pressed them to his face. He was weeping openly as the hands of his parents memorized each part of the face that they together had created.

It was far too much for the lonely potions-master to bear. He too sat and cried as the only child of the marauders felt the loving touch of his parents.

Chapter two is coming. There we will meet Hermione and see the sorting and see what tricks the Headmaster has up his considerable sleeves. Please review, as you are able!

From Chapter One:

He looked at his parents and said what he had always known was true, "I love you, Mom, Dad."

Then Johan Severus Snape saw the impossible; the improbable, and the unspeakable thing happen. A lone hand pushed its way up from each of the paintings – up and out. They were hands made flesh by the miracle that is love. Harry raced forward; grasped the hands and pressed them to his face. He was weeping openly as the hands of his parents memorized each part of the face that they together had created.

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Some people are observant and others are completely clueless. Harry fell into the former category.

When at last the hands withdrew from Harry's face, and the magical moment faded – after Harry had said his goodbye's to his parents – he stood and looked at the man who had become his guardian pro tem.

His eyes were red; swollen from tears and there was a sadness that Harry could feel – even from across the room. "Alright?"

Snape shook his head. "No, Harry, but I will be. I have to be. My wife is waiting for me to get home and there's much to do still."

Harry's jaw dropped.

A small grin swept across the potion-master's face. "Surprised, Harry? Why shouldn't I be married? Just because I didn't marry your mother, I wasn't exactly precluded from finding someone else to love."

"I don't know....it's just that..."

Harry's expression changed as he thought about the fact that he didn't know how everything he had learned in the last 24 hours fit together. He was thinking about all that he had seen in his professor's memories....the friendships; the pranks as kids; then the increasing acts of cruelty as he was drawn into the circle of the death eaters; the 'public' persona...killing the muggle the night that he became a death-eater and took the mark. Then he thought about the fact that Snape had almost casually dispatched his aunt, uncle, and cousin.

Johan Severus Snape was nothing, if not perceptive. It was a skill and a strength that had kept him alive. He knew what Harry was struggling with the contradiction between what he, Snape, had shown him of his past and what he had shown Harry through his actions since they had met. More, Johan Severus Snape knew that Harry was struggling with what his parents' portraits had said to him about their friendship with the potions-master during their time together in school.

Finally, Harry seemed to give up and slumped against the rough-hewn granite wall behind him; covering his face with his hands.

Snape walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "It's all right, Harry. I know it's confusing. Your parents told you only some of our history – and I mean my history with your parents – because there wasn't more time to talk about it and I haven't told you everything about my past....mostly because you don't need to know yet. However, you should know that things always happen for a reason."

"Did you kill my aunt and uncle for a reason?" There was a bitterness of sorts in Harry's tone that surprised the potions-master.

Snape nodded slowly; feeling a sense of sadness for his charge. "Yes, Harry. Even that was for a reason. Mostly it was because they had tortured you for so long..." He let the statement hang in the air for a moment – to give Harry a chance to deny it or protest or something – and then went on, more quietly. "And partly because if I hadn't, Harry, they might have been convinced to give up your whereabouts when the Dark Lord returns. We couldn't allow that. You're important to us – maybe the most important student who's ever come to Hogwarts."

It was not his place, Johan knew, to tell Harry 'why'. He couldn't say anything at all about the thrice-damned prophecy. It was much too soon to rob him of the last vestiges of childhood the Headmaster had said; even if the war that had claimed his parents was not over – just on hiatus. He didn't deserve the burden that would be his to carry, but perhaps, if the Headmaster was right, he wouldn't be alone to in the effort.

"Harry, I know it's asking a lot, but there are a few things about which I need to have you trust me and trust the Headmaster. I've already violated a half-dozen of the Headmasters' requests regarding my time with you. Please don't ask me for more. I can't give you everything that I want to give you...nor can I tell you everything that you might want to know."

It was enough. A single seed that told Harry that there was more to know and that there was more to his story than he had been told. It would spark the young man's curiosity, he hoped, and push him to become more than he was or thought he could be.

Harry looked at him. Their eyes met and the understanding that Snape had hoped for passed between them.

There was a moment of silence between them before Harry looked past his new-found friend and towards the portraits that held his parents' images. It was as if he had made up his mind to trust the Hogwarts potions teacher and to do was he was asked. "Alright", he said softly.

Snape leaned back for a moment, thinking that there was something to support him and almost knocked over a great pile of galleons. "Get yourself together then, Harry. We have much to do still today. I want to have us back at the Inn by the time it is dark." He didn't mention to Harry that the Alley by night was a far different, and more threatening place, and certainly not one for children to be roaming. Knockturn Alley was bad at any time of day, but at night, its denizens were less circumspect about their wanderings. It wouldn't do, Snape knew, for Harry to be bitten by a vampire or a Hag. Vampires were very, very hard to kill and Hags were loathsome, terrible creatures for other

reasons that he shuttered to think about. Harry turned again and looked at his parents' pictures and saw them smiling at him; then back at Snape. "Can I take them with me?"

There was no reason that he couldn't, that Snape could think of, and it would provide Harry some needed company – and love – that he couldn't provide. It was one thing to be Harry's temporary guardian, but quite another to be his true parent.

With a flick of his wand, the portraits shrank to the point that Harry could pick them both up and put them in his pockets – which he promptly did. "Anything else, Harry?"

Harry nodded and pointed to the two trunks that had been the props for the pictures. One was inscribed with the initials JHP and the other with LEP. Harry noticed that the small plaques which bore their initials were not bronze, nor copper, as one might expect on a normal steamer-type trunk, but rather done in what looked to be close to pure gold. He wondered what else was different about the trunks and was about to ask when they, too, shrank to pocket-size. Picking them up, Harry looked about and then said, "Done, I think. There's nothing else here but money I don't want and can't spend."

"Harry" the older man said gently, as he again closed the distance between them. "I think that you're going to find a time when you'll appreciate having the piles of money. If, for no other reason, than it might just help insulate you against some of those who equate money with personal worth. I know it doesn't make sense now, but maybe sooner than later, you'll see that I'm right."

Smiling a little smile, the potions-master said conspiratorially, "Besides, it never hurts to have some money in your pockets when you decide to take your girlfriend or your wife out for a treat."

Snape had never been particularly acquisitive, but he knew the value of having a healthy stack of galleons in his vault. Being a master potions-brewer basically meant that there was a constant line of people queuing outside his door, hoping that he'd brew for them some hard-to-make potion. Some came looking for forbidden potions, of course. Those he turned away immediately. Others, like Lupin,

needed the notoriously difficult Wolfsbane potion made on a monthly basis and that allowed him to charge the Ministry for Magic pretty much whatever he wanted, within reason. Others came looking for cures to esoteric maladies, other than Lycanthropy, and were willing to provide compensation that wasn't monetary. Because of them, he had precious and semi-precious gems in abundance, as well as magical items that he could sell – which made his agent / broker at Gringotts very, very happy, and kept him completely comfortable. It was a good thing, too, because his salary at Hogwarts was never, ever going to make him rich. Being comfortable gave him something that he couldn't discuss with Harry, but that the Headmaster knew. It meant that his former 'associates' – those that also carried the dreaded and hateful 'dark mark' – could not use financial need as leverage over him. More than once, during the dark lord's first reign of terror, it had kept him out of a difficult position where his position as spy for the Order of the Phoenix could have been compromised.

Having a pile of galleons to call his own also made it easier to protect the woman he loved – and that meant more than life itself to him.

They left the bank considerably burdened by the ledgers, galleons, and private treasures that had recently occupied Harry's family vault – even shrunk as they were. Severus Snape felt he had done the right thing by helping Harry gain access to his family's vaults and become emancipated at the same time. After all, the Headmaster hadn't told him not to get Harry emancipated. There would be a time, he thought, that it would be important for Harry to have the freedom to practice magic out in the open, without the Ministry for Magics' silly-ass interference and dictates against under-age magic use.

An abundance of caution dictated their actions from the moment that they exited the front doors of the bank. There was a small, but growing crowd of shoppers / gawkers that had filled the Alley because of rumors that Harry Potter, the Boy-who-lived, was inside. It necessitated a significant change in the professors' demeanor – one that Harry would either grow to hate, he thought, in the years to come, or grow to laugh at. He hoped that they'd at least be able to maintain the ruse of his dislike for Harry long enough to give him the chance to help the Headmaster carry out whatever plans Dumbledore thought necessary to protect the boy.

As they walked down the white marble steps Harry felt, rather than saw, a shift in his guardians' appearance and magic. It was like a dark cloud had covered and obscured the man to the point that he was almost unrecognizable. Even the voice was different.

"Move it, boy. We've not got all day and I grow weary of your presence." The tone of his voice was so nasty – so haughty - that Harry could describe it only as 'greasy' or 'oily' – like the thick, black oil that he had seen floating on the oceans' surface one evening on the telly. As if to reinforce his dictate, Snape pushed him along down the Alley with the point of his wand. It was like being in Vernon Dursley's presence again and Harry silently wished that they could be alone once more, so that he could have his friend back. He thought, sadly, that Snape-the-evil was right: it was going to be a long day.

The first stop was at Eyelop's Owl Emporium, much to Harry's surprise. He was expecting, based on what Johan had said the evening before, that Eyelop's was going to be the last stop, rather than the first.

They were immediately assaulted by the squawks, hisses, and bill-clackings all around them. As they moved down the first aisle, across from the large, wooden, front check-out counter, Snape leaned close to Harry and said in his ear, "Let your magic choose, Harry. Touch each animal gently and carefully. You'll know when you find the right one. Stay away from the rats and the weasels. Those won't work with your magic, I think."

Catching his mentor's eye as he stepped further into the store, Harry nodded. It was exciting to be able to make his own choice with his own money. It wasn't a candy store, but it was close enough!

There were brightly-colored birds of a dozen or more varieties; rabbits, toads – yuck! He thought – as well as rats, a few absolutely gorgeous Mountain weasels, a pair of European mink, and a confusion of European Polecats. Harry didn't see the beautiful, perfectly white snowy owl who watched him intently from her perch.

Pausing by a particularly large stand, Harry found what looked like an armored, multi-colored, iridescent snake with strong, folded-back black wings. He reached out with his right hand and very gently touched the animal's tail – which was the part furthest from its formidable-looking horn-covered head and matte-black, razor-sharp front claws. Though his touch was feather-light, it was enough. The animal whipped around and stared at him intently. "Who are you, human, that you stand there radiating such power?"

Harry blinked and then replied in the same, sibilant snake-language. "Who? Me? I'm just Harry; Harry Potter." Immediately, several people near them stopped and stared openly as Harry conversed with the small dragon.

His mentor's hand on his shoulder startled him; causing him to swing around and look up. Snape's voice was low and urgent. "Harry! You must not let others know that you're a parselmouth! Quickly, have the Wyvern crawl up onto your shoulder. If the owner asks, tell him that they creature had left its perch and you were just trying to make sure that it didn't get hurt. Tell him that you'll buy it...anything....just deflect his questions."

"Yes, Johan" Harry said, almost inaudibly. "I want to find an owl too, if I can."

"We don't have time, Harry. Already, there's still a crowd outside looking for you in the Alley. Word must have gotten out from someone at Gringotts and now we've got to deal with the fools in here who saw you talking to your familiar. We've got to get moving."

Harry put his hand out and touched the almost four-foot long Wyvern again. "Come with me. I like you."

"Do you have fresh mice for me? Do you have a warm place for me to sleep?"

Harry grinned, thinking about all the mice in and around the Inn where they were staying. "Yes, I have a fireplace where you can keep warm and all the mice you could want."

The wyvern crawled up Harry's arm and curled around his shoulders. "Take me home, human."

Feeling good that he had made the right choice, Harry turned and made his way towards the cashier's desk, where Snape was waiting. Nothing needed to be said, as Harry already had his instructions, so he was left to pay for his new familiar. "Do you know how to take care of a wyvern, boy?" the tatty old man behind the counter said, somewhat suspiciously.

"No sir, but he seems to like me and right now that's enough. I'm on my way to Hogwarts and I'm sure that I'll learn everything I need to know about his care, there. Is there anything that you think I should know, though, before I leave?"

"Only that your new familiar is not going to stay that size. They're related to dragons, so he's going to grow...a lot. You'll not be able to keep him in the dorm, I don't think. But – that's your problem. I'm just happy to get rid of him. I got stuck with him six months ago when I tried to purchase a shipment of Salamander eggs and the bastard I dealt with slipped in the egg that's now your pet. He's cost me a fortune in food alone. I can sell him only because, technically, he's not a dragon, since he doesn't breathe fire."

Harry shrugged. "Well, I like him and I think we're going to be just fine."

The man laughed. "Good luck, boy. I hope that you've got the money for the permit that you'll need to have in order to keep him. I know that I can't afford it."

Harry smiled at that. "I think I've got that covered, sir."

"Whatever, boy. Just don't come back here, complaining that the Ministry is hounding you for the fees. I don't want to hear it." His voice was loud enough that the group of people who had earlier heard Harry talking to his new familiar stopped again and listened to what was being said.

Before they could exchange further words, Snape stepped in. "Let's go, boy. I told you we don't have all day and I'm not going to be as forgiving if you delay me further." Harry had not yet been recognized because he was not wearing his family's crest, nor was his famous scar visible, but Snape was definitely a known quantity – and not a good one at that. His presence made the proprietor back off immediately.

Knowing that they couldn't take the time to find an owl, Harry walked quickly and carefully towards the door; ahead of his mentor. He was stopped by a hand on his arm, before he could open the door. "Just remember, Harry, you can't be seen to be leading or be moving without my consent. If our ruse is going to work, you have to look like you're being pushed around and bullied by me. Neither of us likes it, but that's how it has to be."

It was not easy, but Harry let himself be fairly pushed out the door. It was convincing enough that the crowd that had formed outside the store immediately backed off and dispersed a bit. A lone voice, though, called out, "Harry! Harry Potter!"

It caused him to pause for a just a split-second, but not stop. He didn't dare, given what Snape had said about his protection and the ruse that they were trying to maintain. As if to reinforce the point, Harry felt his mentor's wand-tip digging its way into his should-blade; pushing him down the street and towards Flourish and Blots – the main bookstore for Hogwarts students in Diagon Alley. Harry wrapped himself slightly more tightly in his cloak and tried his best not to do anything that would attract further attention to himself.

As they walked, and even with the magical wyvern wrapped securely about his neck and shoulders, Harry could feel the strong, ambient magic of the Alley everywhere he touched. Along doorways; near the cash-register at Eyelop's, and all over the Inn where they were staying - it was like a static charge everywhere....but warmer and fuzzier. More, it felt to Harry like something he could manipulate directly. It almost felt like he could somehow scoop it up and mold it to his liking.

No more than one hundred steps later, the tip of his mentor's wand pushed him through the bookstore's doorway.

The store itself was a revelation. Once inside, Harry saw that the inside was considerably larger than the outside appearance...which made a kind of sense, given how much magic he felt as he entered. The magical field was like stepping through the downpour of a waterfall – which was saying something, given how strongly magical (and overwhelming) his parents' vault was at Gringotts.

Snape was close behind him and it became confusing to Harry for a moment as he tried to differentiate between the store's magic and his mentors'. He took several steps forward, away from his mentor and towards the center of the store. He felt his perceptions stabilize the farther into the store he walked. Just as he turned back to face his friend and ask him what he should do next, Harry felt something he couldn't describe. Like the pull of an irresistible magnet or the suction of an enormous vacuum, Harry was drawn towards the aisle immediately to the right of the long, dark, sturdy-looking oak main counter; the one with the sign over it saying 'School book orders here'.

From the end of the right-hand most aisle, a young, beautiful, bushy-haired, brown-eyed girl emerged; obviously not of her own accord. She looked around; trying to figure out why she was being drawn away from the books that had so fascinated her, even as her steps drew her closer to the young boy with the uncontrolled, raven-colored hair and piercing green eyes.

Once the two were within ten feet of each other, the pull became truly irresistible and they rushed towards each other, hands outstretched; neither completely understanding what was happening to them. Harry was too far ahead of his mentor to be stopped and the same was true for the young girl. The moment Harry's hands touched the girls', a dazzling white light formed around them and they were obscured from everyone's sight but each others'.

What happened inside the cloud was even more extraordinary.

Harry felt the softness of the girls hands in his, while she felt his hands – stronger and rougher – grasp hers with a gentleness that she

could not have expected. It wasn't the touch of his hands, though, that overwhelmed her, but rather the touch of his magic and his thoughts. She could feel him...all of him...as his magic wound in and around them; calling forth her magic and caressing it like a lover would.

His shock was complete as he recognized who she was. She heard his thoughts in her mind, even though they had yet to speak aloud to each other. "My name is Harry. Harry Potter." As they touched, Harry recognized who she was...and it hit him like a bolt of lightning. "I've dreamed of you all my life."

Her laughter was as a peeling bell in his mind as she looked into his mesmerizing emerald-green eyes and experienced the same shock of recognition. Her excitement was total and she felt a happiness that she had never experienced before. "And I, of you. You are the one who always rescues me in my dreams and makes me feel safe. Even before I knew I was a witch, you were with me every night. I named my teddy-bear 'Harry' before I knew your name."

"You called to me and I could feel you trying to reach out and find me...but I don't even know your name!"

"I know. You were always just beyond my reach. It was SO frustrating! I could feel you near me last night, though, and I knew we were finally going to meet."

"Me, too. But I still don't know your name!"

"It's all right, Harry. I am Hermione Granger. Hermione Potter now, I think. Actually...Hermione Jane Potter" Her answer did not surprise him; nor did it surprise her. It simply felt right. It was the answer to questions she could not have asked her mentor, even if she had been able to properly form the question in the first place.

"Is this what you want, Harry?"

"I've never dreamed of anything else, Hermione, and yes, it's what I want more than anything else in the world. I knew you were out there though, somewhere. You were the reason that my relatives couldn't

break me. I knew that all I had to do is find you. Even my mentor doesn't know about you because I hid it from him."

"No more hiding, Harry. I'm here now – with you. We will be at Hogwarts together."

"How did you know?"

"I can see it in your thoughts...but I also saw your mentor – the tall, ugly, greasy-haired one - holding your booklist before we touched."

"Snape? He's nothing like he looks on the outside. He saved me. He's going to be our potions professor this fall. He's already taught me a bunch of stuff! You'll like him once you get to know him. He just really wants to teach students who work hard and pay attention. I can do that!"

For what seemed an eternity, the two shared as many images and memories as they could see happy, carefree images of Hermione with her parents. "What will we tell them? What will we tell your parents about us?"

"We tell our professors the truth and we tell my parents as little as possible, until they need to know more. They worry too much anyway."

Harry did not know what else to say. It was all new...but so familiar and so right that he didn't question it. There was only one thing left to do. "Can I kiss you, Hermione?"

"God yes, Harry. Kiss me. Kiss me and make me yours forever."

He did...and from the moment their lips met, Harry James Potter and Hermione Jane Granger were no longer young strangers seeking each other at a distance; both magical and both desperate to find the other, but a magically bonded couple; willed together by fate and by a whimsical, loving God.

Inside the brilliant white sphere, there was love, total acceptance, and joy. Outside was chaos...and a minute of complete peace was all that the fates would allow, for a long, long while to come.

The moment that Harry and Hermione were engulfed, Severus Snape's sometimes impetuous nature got the better of him. Rushing forward, he tried to grab Harry away from her. That was mistake number one. He was slammed backwards and smashed into a tall stack of potions textbooks; bringing several down around his head and shoulders. Mistake number two was letting his anger get the better of him. Taking out his wand, Snape fired a stunner at the center of the cloud. It came straight back at him; knocking him through the book-pile, flat on his back, and out cold.

Minerva McGonagall was nowhere nearly as hasty as her colleague and chose to stand and watch the outcome of the miraculous cloud which had enveloped her charge and the young boy, whom she assumed was Harry Potter.

With a flick of her wrist, she enervated her colleague and helped him to his feet. "You shouldn'a been so hasty, Johan" she said; her Scottish brogue thick with irritation.

Wincing from the unexpected pain of the fall, the contrite potions-master looked at his friend. "Aye, Minnie. Forgive me for my stupidity."

"You're daft, Johan, but your heart's in the right place" she said, much more softly. "Besides, I think we've just seen something special in our two charges."

Her observation was prescient. The actinic-white cloud around the two children began to fade; revealing...a bonded couple. Even ten feet away, Johan Severus Snape could feel the pulsing energy of their merged magic.

"What the fuck?" he swore under his breath. The potions-master, after years and years of education, knew that curse-words are often the first resort of a narrow, uneducated mind. He knew, too, that as

the song said, there's a time for living and a time for dying...and a time for swearing. It was definitely a time for swearing.

Harry looked at his adopted mentor, while still holding Hermione's hands in his own, and said, "It's all right, Professor. I'm safe. She's here now."

Hermione, likewise, turned and looked at her mentor and smiled. "I'm fine now, Professor. He's here...and I'm safe."

The white cloud that had surrounded them was supplanted by a soft, but definite golden glow. The moment that Minerva McGonagall saw it, she knew what had happened and what she was seeing. It was not something, she was sure, that the Headmaster was expecting.

The one thing that was odd was how quiet it was in the store. Not a single person; employee or customer, was speaking. Most all of them were rooted to the spot where they had been the moment that the white cloud had formed. Snape looked around and tried to weigh whether or not it would be worth it to obliviate all of them.

Snape turned to his colleague in crime and said "What do we do next? We're not going to be able to keep this under wraps very long."

Minnie McGonagall thought about their situation for a moment and tried to consider all of the possible ramifications of having news of Harry and Hermione's bond get out. After mulling it over, she looked at her friend. "Obliviate, then. It will buy us more than a month's time to come up with a more concrete way of keeping things quiet. The Headmaster didn't say when he wants to perform the lunctus Animus ritual, but I think it will be the first Friday night after the sorting and we're more than a month out from that."

The potions-master agreed. Silently, he lifted his wand and looked around. There were five customers on the second-floor balcony; eight on the first floor, and five employees that were visible. He wanted to make sure to get them all. Minnie knew what he was up to and put her hand over his, so that her magic would add to his when the spell was cast. As always, his wand-movement was flawless as he executed the three crisp strokes that signified the initiation, power,

and conclusion of the charm. The deep, violet color of the charm's casting filled the room (by-passing Harry and Hermione) and struck each of those who had seen the magic which had bound Harry and Hermione together. Each was given the impression that he or she had passed the intervening time looking for books or quietly chatting with the store's employees about the new books which were coming for the start of the school-year. None were the wiser that something amazing and life-changing had happened in their presence.

Satisfied that their charges were safe, or at least as safe as they could be in the moment, the two professors stepped close to them. Neither Harry, nor Hermione wanted to let go of the other. They had watched and listened to their mentors, even as they shared thousands of memories and opened themselves completely to the other.

Minerva spoke first. "Do you both realize that what has happened here today cannot be shared with anyone? Neither Professor Snape nor I completely understand what has happened to you both today, but it's obvious that you've bonded. Why that is, we may never understand, but since it seems to be so, we have to keep it quiet. There are those who would seek to use it against you."

Harry looked at her and then shifted his gaze to his mentor. Their eyes met and there was a nod. "Professor", Harry said, his attention once more directed towards the deputy-headmistress, "You mean the so-called 'pure-bloods', don't you?"

Her lips parted in surprise, as she took in a hasty breath. "Yes, Mr. Potter, I do. There are those who supported Voldemort in the last war who would still subscribe to that theory, who would try to harm you because of this bonding. You're too important to us to have your safety unnecessarily risked."

Hermione understood what her mentor was saying. Harry had shared with her everything that Snape had said to him the night before and she had taken it in without comment. She had seen prejudice in her own community against those who were from Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, or the Caribbean. She knew that they were often shunned by employers – her parents had both said so – or ill-treated when their

children went to primary school. She has personally seen how badly some of the children had been treated by their teachers. Even at the Nonington Church of England Primary School, where Hermione had attended, there was discernable prejudice at times. It wasn't overt, really. Children weren't held back from achieving academically, but they weren't necessarily encouraged, either. Some of the teachers seemed to make definitive efforts to spend more time helping those who were "Pure Brits" as opposed to those who were recent immigrants or newly naturalized citizens. None of it had kept Hermione from her constant, outstanding achievement, but it had definitely shaped her sense of fairness and justice.

Harry knew all of it in an instant, just as she had learned about the torture, degradation, and abuse he had suffered growing up. It had made her heart ache for him as she saw and felt all that he had experienced. She promised him that she would protect him for the rest of her life; giving him the love and companionship that he had been denied for so long. It was more than he deserved, Harry thought, but it was better by far than the life he thought he was destined to lead before Johan Severus Snape entered his life.

"We understand, Professor. We will do what you ask."

It was odd, in a way. The young man before her was not at all resistant. She wondered just what her colleague had said to him that made him so cooperative. She made mental note to talk to Snape as soon as she could. "Let us collect your books and be away, then. I'm sure that Professor Snape has his own ideas about what we need to do to protect the two of you now."

Harry and Hermione moved as one unit; never letting go of the others' hand, as they gathered their books. Since they were taking the same classes – Charms, Arithmancy, Potions, Runes, Care of Magical Creatures, Transfiguration, History of Magic, Writing and research, and flying, they were able to significantly reduce the amount of time they had to spend gathering their textbooks.

As they moved about the store, Minnie McGonagall edged close to her colleague and whispered to him. "See? They move like they're one person. Their bond must already be incredibly strong. If they're

telepathic, too, we're going to have to advance them quickly or they'll grow bored. You should have seen her conjuration yesterday. She created a stuffed animal on her first try! Oh Merlin, Johan! She's going to be the best in her year, hands-down."

Tilting his head, Johan smiled wickedly. "You're on. Twenty galleons and a dinner of my choosing says that he tops her in at least five out of their nine classes".

She thought about that for a moment and weighed whether Hermione would be good enough in the four core-courses to fend off Harry's expected strength in flying, potions, and charms to hold him off. Deciding that she would be, she smirked and said "deal". Shaking on it, the two stood watching their charges finish up their shopping and pay for the lot at the front counter.

"Time to go, you two. We have much to do. I'm going to hang back and watch for trouble, and let Professor McGonagall lead you both. I think it will be better for all of us that way."

And shop they did. From Flourish and Blots, it was on to Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions - where they were both fitted for the work-robos and formal robes that they would need for school, as well as semi-dress clothes for the occasional special evening at the school. Once they were both measured and had picked out the colors that they liked best, Madame Malkin herself sat with them.

Harry held Hermione's hand throughout all of the fittings – which did not go unnoticed by the proprietress. When she was all done, Madame Malkin said to them – in a tone that was too low to be heard by their teachers in the front of the store, "Are you then a couple?"

Nodding, Harry and Hermione could not resist smiling. "I take it that it's new?" Their giggles answered the question. "Well – I don't do this for just anyone, but I do have the Potter crest on file. Would you like it added to your formal robes?"

"Hermione? Yes?"

"Yes, Harry. Please."

“Yes, then, Madame Malkin, and thank you.”

“No need to thank me, Harry. Your parents were here many years ago and they were generous to me and supported me when I was first getting started. It’s the least I could do to repay their kindness.”

Her words created a sudden, burning desire in Harry to know more about his parents. “Don’t worry, Harry. We’ll make sure that we learn everything that we can about your parents. I want you to feel as connected to them as I do with my parents.”

Harry found himself unable to put into words the appreciation and thanks that he felt for her immediate, strong support. He wondered, in that secret place that all people have, whether what he was feeling was what his parents talked about, when they had told him of their love for him and their love for each other. He wondered, too, whether his mentor’s love for his mother was the same. He thought that it probably was.

Several hours later, once they had made their way to Olivander’s and picked out their new wands, their shopping was complete. Harry had been completely creeped-out by what the wand-maker had told him about his wand and its connection to the wand that gave him his scar. The information had also significantly disquieted the potions-master and Harry wondered if there was something more he ought to know about the connection that he wasn’t being told. Hermione, on the other hand, had found her Hornbeam with Dragon-heartstring core wand (10 & ¼ in.) fairly quickly, without issues or dire warnings.

One thing that Harry knew were secreted away from his parents’ vault at Gringotts in their two magical trunks, which he hadn’t Professor Snape about, were his parents’ wands. He planned to give Hermione his mothers’ wand – a 10 & ¼ in. Willow and Dragon-heartstring wand – as a backup (if, as he hoped, the wand also accepted her) and keep his fathers’ wand for himself. He thought that if one wand was good, two were better.

After a late-afternoon ice-cream at Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour, Harry, Hermione and their professors found their way back to

the Inn. It had been decided that Harry and Hermione would have a private room together, in order to continue their bonding. There was a great deal of embarrassment on the deputy-headmistresses' part when she told them both that physical contact between them had to be almost continuous for the next two years or they would both grow ill and die. She thought that it was the definite down-side of bonding so early. Harry and Hermione thought otherwise.

Even as Minerva concluded her 'talk' with them about the realities of youth bonding early, the two youth were deep in conversation about what it would mean to finally have someone to keep warm with at night. "I used to have my dog" she thought to him. "Speckles....I know. What about Sean? Where does he sleep?" "Ugh. With my parents. Actually, he sleeps at the foot of my mother's side of the bed. He'll steal her spot if she gets up at any point in the night. My father complains that Sean will push HIM out of the bed, too, so that he can stretch out and sleep. I've seen my dad fighting with the dog over access to the pillows. It's really funny." The images that she pushed to him made him laugh. "Will I have to fight you for blankets?" Hermione blew a raspberry at him mentally for that. "No, I don't think so...but I've never slept with anyone before, so I don't know. What about you?" His answer was very much less pleasant; as he shared with her the memories he had of how cold it was at night with just one, thread-bare cotton blanket. "It's too bad that your relatives are dead. I think I might have wanted that job for myself." "It's done, Hermione, and I never have to worry about them again. I can't wait to be warm next to you tonight!" Harry could feel her excitement. It amazed him that suddenly, he had a teacher who liked him; a warm, wonderful place to sleep, more money than he could need in one hundred lifetimes, and a....girlfriend? Fiancé? Wife? With whom to share a bed. Wife, he decided quickly. They would never, ever be apart...and that's what a wife meant to him: someone with whom he would share the rest of his life. The thought of it made his insides churn with the kind of happiness that he had never before thought possible.

Tom the Inn-keeper was completely amenable to their need for two more rooms, as the Inn was at only half-occupancy for the moment. August was never a very good month for the tourism industry in London - with the weather hot and the atmosphere sticky and oppressive - so he was happy to have the business, if only for one extra night. Harry and Hermione's room ended up being sandwiched

between the room that Harry and Professor Snape had shared the night before and the room that Professor McGonagall had been planning on taking with Hermione. Both Professors Snape and McGonagall performed cooling charms on the three rooms, so they were tolerable, if not pleasant, to be in for the night.

Around the private dinner-table that the four shared that night, Hermione and Harry both admitted to their mentors that they had, in fact, been dreaming of the other for many years, and that even if they had wanted to, they could not have resisted the pull that they felt once they were in the same room together. The fact that Harry had not told him was not what bothered Johan Snape. It was, rather, that Harry had been able to successfully hide the fact from him, even under sustained pressure from the professor's legilimency.

"You're not hiding anything else from me, are you Harry?" Snape said a bit more forcefully than he had intended.

"No, Professor.....Johan, I'm not. At least, I don't think I am. Now that I have Hermione in my life, there's no reason for me to hide anything else." He didn't mention the wands...because Snape didn't need to know. What his parents willed to him were his business and no one else's.

"Well, you certainly gave me a surprise when you started talking to your familiar today. I had not suspected that you'd be able to talk to dragon-kind, the way you talk to snakes." He paused for a moment and then said, "Speaking of that, what are you going to name him?"

Harry grinned. "Well, at first, because I thought that she was a 'he', I was going to name "him" 'Julius Squeezer', but then I told "him" about it, "he" slapped me with "his" tail and told me that SHE wanted me to get HER a mouse or she'd stop talking to me. SO...I've settled on Amrita or "Amri" for short."

Hermione looked at newly-bonded husband and thought privately to him, "I like it, Harry. Not a common name, that's for sure."

"I like it too. It's a pretty name"

There was no little bit of shock when both Harry and Hermione heard his familiar's voice in their minds.

Amrita's mental snort at their shock was funny, if unexpected. "What? You bring me into your bonding and you expect me not to be included? Do your human teachers teach you nothing?"

"We're too young, Amrita. Neither of us grew up in the magical world. Until yesterday afternoon, I thought magic was all illusion and fake. Hermione grew up as a muggle, not knowing anything either."

"Ah, well, then there's much to be learned. We will make powerful magic together."

"What do you mean, Amri?" Hermione asked silently.

"I mean, mistress, that the three of us may be able to combine our magic. I don't know for sure, but I feel it to be true."

Both Harry and Hermione felt an excitement that was almost palpable.

The exchange between her new students was subtle, but evident to the Deputy Headmistress. Reaching across the table, she put a hand on Hermione's closer arm – which caught the young girls' attention. "Hermione, can you and Harry share thoughts? Are you able to talk to him that way?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, we can. The moment we touched, it started. We introduced ourselves and then...bang! We were able to share thoughts, images, memories...everything. I have to focus on what he's thinking, if I'm going to be a part of it, but we can trade...I'm not sure how to say this....but we can trade...ideas? It's like I'll start thinking about something...putting pieces of stuff together in my head and Harry can kind of 'follow along' or something. It's definitely weird, but it's really cool, too." She wasn't about to say anything at all about the fact that they could talk to their familiar as well. That was one secret that could never get out.

Both Minerva and Johan took in what the young girl had just told them – with no little bit of incredulity – and then looked at their

charges more intently. Johan was the first to speak. "Harry, is what Hermione just said true? Can you really share all of that with her?"

Gently squeezing Hermione's hand for emotional support, Harry looked at his mentor. "Yes, we can. It's weird, like Hermione said, but we can do exactly those things. It's like...being able to completely experience another persons' life from the inside. I can even see how she saw herself in the mirror this morning, after she got dressed for the day."

The renowned transfiguration professor looked at her colleague with a 'come-here-a-moment-so-I-can-talk-to-you' shake of her head and the two stood and walked over to the far corner of the room. Leaning close to him, she said, "You know that Albus is going to have a total melt-down when he hears them talk about what they can do. More, he's going to be trying to duplicate the ability elsewhere, if he thinks that it is at all useful."

"Un huh", the potions-master half-intoned / half-grunted. "And he's going to keep them close until he has it figured out or decides that he can't do anything with it. Either way, though, they lose. I can't see telling him – at least not for a year or two. That will give Harry and Hermione enough time to adjust to the changes and to start to formalize their union."

That gave the Deputy Headmistress a small chortle. "Well, I'm not sure how much more formal it needs to be. They're going to be sharing a bed from tonight, onwards, so..."

"Minnie" he protested, "You know very well what I meant. Harry needs to give her a ring and formalize their bond. It probably shouldn't happen for a year or two, but it needs to happen eventually."

While the two teachers were talking, Hermione moved from where she had been - in the corner of the room, closest to the wall, to sitting on Harry's lap. They were both feeling the need to be in closer physical contact and welcomed the chance to touch each other more completely. "We get to share a bed, Harry! I can't wait!" Harry, on the other hand, was nervous about it. He was worrying about whether

she'd like the way he looked when he undressed for bed or what she'd do if he put his hands places on her body at night that she didn't want.

"Harry....stop it. I can see what you're thinking. Don't worry about it! We're both going to be undressed...and personally, I'm looking forward to being held. I don't care where your hands go on me! I want to be touched by you! I've been dreaming about it my whole life."

Somehow, his worries seemed to melt away in the onslaught of her reassurances. It was as if she could get right in and deal with his personal worries in a way that no one else could or had ever done. "I just want it to be good for you, Hermione. I don't ever want to hurt you."

There wasn't much to do to help deal with his anxiety except lean in and kiss him, so she did. It was warm, sweet, and definitely good for both of them.

A pause in their communication was interrupted by Amrita's amused voice. "And where am I going to sleep, master?"

"On the pillow, in a corner of the bed, or else over by the fire where it's warm. Your choice."

"Comfort over warmth, I think" the cheeky animal said.

"Just so long as you keep those claws and that tail of yours to yourself. I don't want to get spiked in the middle of the night. And no going off hunting, unless you tell us you're going, first."

So wrapped up were they that when their teachers returned to the table, neither Harry nor Hermione heard them.

"Harry, Hermione! Enough, please. We know that you're both under a compulsion of sorts and that the bond you both feel is pushing you to be in constant contact...but please try to have a modicum of decency about where and how that contact is expressed, ok?"

The two nodded their agreement.

“Now, it’s getting late and the two of you need to be getting to bed. I want to talk to both of you privately, though, before that. Hermione, why don’t you come with me next door and we’ll have a conversation.”

Hermione looked nervous, but nodded her acquiescence. Standing, the transfiguration professor and her young charge walked through the door which connected the rooms; closing it behind them.

In the mean-time, Johan Severus Snape looked at his own charge. “Well, Harry? How is it that you not only found a quite powerful familiar, but the wand-mate to the one that caused you that scar, and on top of that, your life bond-mate? Were you looking for the hat-trick or did it just ‘happen’ ?”

Harry felt distressed that his mentor was judging him and that he had no answer for him. He hung his head and said forlornly, “I don’t know, sir. It just happened. I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you about Hermione. I didn’t know it was her...but once I saw her, I recognized her immediately and then, somehow, we were sharing everything about our lives.”

Swishing the last of the Italian Barolo wine around in his glass before drinking it down, the potions-master thought about all that had happened and about what he needed to say to the only son of his best friends.

“Harry, I’m sorry if I made you feel like you were being judged just now. I didn’t mean for that to be the case. I’m just surprised. I’ve never, ever met a student like you...and there’s a part of me that sincerely prays that I never do again. I’m not sure that I’d survive it. I’m quite certain that these next seven years are going to be nothing less than absolutely fascinating, though.

I won’t lie to you Harry. There are dark times coming. Somehow, the Dark lord is going to find a way to return. I’ll do everything I can to make it as difficult for him as possible, but I’m only one man and even as good a wizard as I am, I can still be killed. I need the Headmaster,

just like you do. I need his protection and his support, while you need to learn everything...and I mean that literally....that you can from him. He's already forgotten more magic than I will ever know and he is your greatest hope for these next seven years."

Harry started to protest; to say that his new mentor was smart and good and that he'd do everything that was asked of him. Snape smiled. There was something to be said for being a powerful, passive Legillemencer.

Putting up his hands, Johan Snape smiled at his charge. "Harry...thank you for all the things you were just thinking. If you do even half of what you just committed yourself to, I will be incredibly pleased. I, too, want to teach you everything I can. You know how to cook – your happily dead relatives saw to that. Well – in a fashion, they did you a favor. Potions-making is like cooking. You have to follow directions precisely to get things to come out right. You know how to do that and you have the right discipline for it. Now you seem to have the emotional commitment for it, too, because of Hermione. If you can teach her to do as well as you are ready to do, then you'll know the subject twice as well."

Harry smiled. He was feeling relieved at what he was being told and took a deep, cleansing breath.

"Good, Harry. You're learning how to control your emotions. That will help you a great deal in this next year. Now, let's talk about tonight. First, congratulations. You've found your bond-mate years ahead of when you might have ever expected to do so. Hermione seems to be an incredibly remarkable girl, with her own, huge reserve of magical power. Second, I want you to know that there are no questions that Professor McGonagall and I are not willing to answer. You're about to do something that I wouldn't have expected to happen for you until your sixth or seventh year. I mean that you're about to sleep with a girl for the first time."

Harry swallowed hard and looked distinctly embarrassed; his ears flushing with the strength of his blush.

“It’s alright, Harry. You shouldn’t at all be embarrassed. You’re going to be just fine. Now...some practical things that you need to know. One – you should not be worried about whether you’re ‘mature’ enough physically. You’re a very young eleven year-old boy who’s not begun to mature, really. The growth potions that I’ve given you have not yet kicked in and it’s going to be another month before they do. Once they do, you’ll start to grow quite a bit and ‘catch-up’ with where you should be.”

The potions-master got up from his chair; turned and started pacing the room. Finally, he turned and looked at Harry, while leaning on the back of the chair that he just abandoned.

“Two – Hermione is going to be just as scared. You’re going to see her naked and I want you to know that she’s worried that you won’t like the way she looks. You have to reassure her that such is NOT the case and that you are committed to her. Understand?”

Harry looked at him and blinked. “Yes. I think so. I won’t tell you that I’m not a little scared.”

“Good. That means you’re not an insensitive berk. Now, three – and this is the hard part, Harry. You have to be confident with her. If she wants you to touch her, then DO IT CONFIDENTLY. Do it gently, but don’t hesitate. She’ll read your hesitation to mean that you don’t like her or don’t like her looks and that will make her retreat emotionally – which would be really bad for your bond. If you take her into your arms and hold her the way you were doing this afternoon, then you’ll do just fine.”

Harry thought he could do that. Holding Hermione was the best thing that had ever happened to him and he was more anxious than he was willing to let on to have it happen again.

“Finally, Harry – I want you to enjoy what is about to happen. You are luckier than you have any right to be. So few bonds ever happen the way yours has that it’s hard to know whether your particular circumstances are completely unheard of or just damn rare. Either way, take advantage of it. You now have someone in your life who

going to know you better than anyone else and will support you in all things – if you're willing to do the same."

"I am, Johan. I can feel her in the next room and even now, we've been apart too long. I need to get to her."

His mentor smiled. "Go then, Harry. Go to her and don't forget what I've said."

Harry threw himself at his mentor and gave him a huge hug, before disengaging and bolting through the door that separated the two rooms.

In the next room, Hermione sat thinking about all the things that she had just been told by her mentor. It wasn't overwhelming, but it sure was *news*. She had just started contemplating what her parents would say when she finally broke it to them that not only was she not going to spend the rest of August with them, but that she was essentially married, to boot.

Her entire focus went out the door the moment she felt his magic. She had started to get edgy almost immediately, once she was out of contact with him and she had told her mentor so, but the professor told her, in no uncertain terms, that there were things that she had to be told and understand clearly, prior to the evenings' anticipated events. The fifteen minutes that she was apart from Harry were some of the longest minutes that she had ever spent and each additional minute felt to her like nails being dragged down a chalk-board.

The bed she was sitting on – a queen sleigh-bed with a dark-green comforter, down-filled pillows, and matching jade-colored, Egyptian-cotton sheets – somehow set Harry at ease. He wasn't really even aware of it, but the colors were soothing and he started to feel more relaxed. It helped that Hermione had stretched out, taken his hand, and pulled him to her as quickly as she was able, once he entered the room.

"Thank god, Harry. I thought Professor Snape was going to keep talking to you forever."

"I wouldn't have let him. I could feel your touch and I wanted to get out of there just as much as you wanted me to."

"Kiss me?"

"With pleasure, love."

The two fell back on the bed and shyly, at first, touch each others' faces before their lips met. It didn't take long, however, before each felt flushed with the first bloom of desire. "Did you hear what Snape said before he let me go?" Harry thought to her, as they continued to nuzzle and kiss each other.

"He was right, you know. I didn't expect him to say all those things, but he was righter than I would have given him credit for".

"I almost choked when he talked about being naked with you." Hermione looked at him, a hint of sadness crossing her face. "Not for the reason you think, Hermione. Help me take off my shirt and then look at my back."

"Ok."

Harry sat up, slowly, and Hermione helped him pull his shirt up and off. He stretched out so that she could look at him. Her gasp Harry expected, but the tears...those, he didn't. Hermione rolled him over and kissed him – hard. "I'm yours Harry. Scars or no, I'm yours. I know who you are and what you've been through and now that I've found you, I'm not ever giving you up."

The relief Harry felt was total. His arms swept around Hermione and pulled her up and tight against him. Their lips met and their kiss was as passionate as any ever delivered.

As they broke apart, Hermione smiled at him. "Now, what were you saying about getting naked together?"

Harry grinned at her; his hand rubbing her back in broad, loving circles. "You're overdressed."

Hermione giggled as Harry's hand made its way down to the hem of her shirt and started to lift up. "Bet you can fix that."

Kissing her, because it was easier and quicker than talking – silently or otherwise – the 'boy-who-lived' became the 'boy-who-stripped'. Once her shirt was gone, Hermione quickly shrugged off the training-bra she was wearing. "Damn thing is a pain. My mother makes me wear it because she said I had to get used to them. Fuck that. I'll wear one once I truly need one or can't find magic to do a better job of it."

There was no argument from him. A part of him instinctively knew that when one's lover declares that fewer clothes are better than more clothes...the only proper response is an appreciative moan. "Hmmmm. Nice. We are going to have a wonderful life together, Hermione."

"Well – that depends on how quickly you can get me out of this damn skirt and my tights. They've been driving me nuts all evening."

Reaching around, Harry felt for a button to undo or a zipper or something, but found nothing on the outside. Hermione felt his hands caressing and searching her waist and decided to help things along. "It's a wrap-around, Harry. There are two clips on the inside. Find where the cloth overlaps and then slide the material to the side. That will undo the first clasp. Once you've done that, the skirt will unwrap half-way. Then you can undo the second clasp and the skirt will just fall away."

She could tell that he liked that idea very much, as his breath became a bit shallower and faster. It was natural for her to reach out and run her fingers through his raven-black curls as his fingers sought out the second clasp on her skirt. Once it was undone, her eyes met his and she nodded. "Now Harry, pull off my tights. My knickers will want to go with them. You can take them off, too, if you want or leave them. They're coming off, too, one way or the other...but I thought you might want to see me in them and explore a bit before they did."

Slowly and confidently, with Snape's admonitions playing in his thoughts, Harry rolled the tights down Hermione's legs and then off –

so that they joined the pile of clothes that were gathering at the edge of the bed. Once he was done, his eyes traveled once more up the length of her body (which wasn't that far, given that she was only 4'10 and 6 stone 7). Her knickers were soft, white cotton, cut high and elasticized at the leg...with small red hearts all over them. She saw him looking and smiled. "Like them?"

"Love them, actually. They're really pretty on you. I never expected, though, that the first time I saw a girls' knickers up close, they'd be on....on my wife."

His hesitation was something she understood. It had floored her when Professor McGonagall had explained what being bonded really meant. It was much more than simply being connected to someone mentally for your whole life. It was marriage, in the old way. Much, much more than a friendship or a marriage in modern terms, it literally meant that their two souls were actually halves of a greater whole that had somehow been destined to be connected.

It had also floored her to hear that they would not be alone in their year – that the Headmaster was intent on performing a magical ritual that would allow all of the others in their year to be bonded as well – if they found compatible mates.

"Blew my mind too, Harry, when she told me what our bonding really meant. It took me a few minutes to really get my head around it, but once I did, I had no problems committing myself to you, not just with my heart – because you already had that – but with my body, too. I'm really glad to have you be here, next to me."

More kisses were definitely in order, Harry thought, so he leaned down and captured her mouth with his; even as his fingers caressed and explored her body. It was even more electric for them and it caused no little amount of impatience with getting completely undressed. Harry broke their connection after two minutes of fervent kissing so that he could sit up and completely strip off.

"Want help?"

"Yes, please. I think I've lost some coordination."

Giggling, Hermione worked on his belt. Once it was undone, she unzipped his pants and stripped him bare.

His instinctive reaction, when her gaze locked on his manhood, was to curl up and die. He was, just like Snape said he might be, mortified that he wasn't 'enough' for her and was a disappointment to her. Fortunately, Hermione followed the flow of his thoughts and stomped on them, hard.

"Harry James Potter! You stop that right now. Just because you're young doesn't mean you have anything to be embarrassed about. For gods' sake! You're eleven years old. Boys don't even start developing that way for almost another two years. I'm sure you're going to be more than enough for me!"

It was a sensitive point with him, she knew. The almost-starvation diet that his relatives had kept him on had deprived him of years of normal physical growth and so he was both extremely short for his age as well as under-endowed in all other ways. "Professor Snape told you that it was going to take a while for his growth potions to kick in. You've got to trust him on that."

Uncurling (mentally), Harry let her look him over completely, without further embarrassment. It didn't take long for her to start touching him – first all over his chest, and then in ever-widening circles. While her hands grazed his bits during several passes, she never completely stopped to 'take them in hand' and focus on them, alone. She sensed that it would be too much, too soon. She did make a note to herself to come back to them after the growth potions had kicked in and done their work. The one thing that she absolutely didn't want was for him to feel undesired. There were already enough issues with the terrible scars that criss-crossed his back.

Pulling his hands onto her body, she decided to distract him from any negative thoughts. "Touch me? I mean...all over. I want your hands all over my body...and yes, I mean down into my knickers, too. I want to feel my husbands' touch."

There was nothing that Harry wanted more, really, than to please her, so his hands began the same broad spiral patterns that she had used on his body. Only, he started just above her breasts and worked down and all over. Nothing was left untouched. When he found a spot that made her respond particularly well, he concentrated on it with gentle pressure and focus before moving on.

On his forth pass over her body; he let his hand push down, into, and along the edge of her knickers. Grasping his hand, Hermione showed him that she was ready for more by pushing the exploring hand down and into her kickers. Her sex, like the rest of her, was silky-smooth and soft to the touch and she was wet. At first, he thought it was because she had had an 'accident'. "No, silly. I'm wet because I really, REALLY like your touch. It's my body's way of letting you and me know that you're doing the right thing. It also gets me ready to..."

She left off, wondering how much she should say, before she felt one of his fingers sliding down and into her body a little bit. The pleasure that she felt from it was unspeakable. Nothing could have prepared her for it. She moaned and pushed her body at him; trying to get him to go deeper.

"Am I doing it right?"

"Fuck! YES! DON'T STOP!"

Kissing her again, he felt her desire for his touch, as well as her fear of not being good enough for him. Ruthlessly squashing those thoughts, he let her know how beautiful he thought she was and how good it felt to touch her so intimately.

Eventually, her body shuttered and she collapsed back into the bed in a boneless heap of well-satisfied witch-goo. After she regained some semblance of control, she reached up and touched his face. "That was amazing. I can't believe you made me orgasm that easily. I definitely have to find a way to do that for you, just as soon as you're ready."

Harry withdrew his hand from her knickers slowly. The feeling of touching her like he had been doing was something to be savored

and he so he tried to memorize every little bit of it. "I'm glad you liked it, Hermione. I didn't know what I was doing, really, but once you started to shiver like that and tell me not to stop, well.....I just kind of did what I thought you liked."

"It was brilliant, Harry. I just wish it could have gone on longer."

Nodding in understanding, he thought about what else they might be able to do. Fortunately, she was already ahead of him. "Let's get under the covers first, Harry, then I'll show you what we can do next".

It didn't him but a moment to comply and soon, he was happily wrapped around his new wife. "Much better. Now, put one hand on my bum and with the other...."

Harry reached down and cupped her bum with his hand as she showed him. It was one of the most erotic things he had ever done, even given how he had just pleased her with his fingers. Her soft, cotton knickers seemed to magnify, rather than hamper the feeling of touching her so. His magic aura flared and she could feel his burning desire for her. The other hand; which he had snuck down and under her (so that she was completely embraced) she captured over her breast, so that he could feel her pebble-hard nipple and how hot her skin was to the touch.

"Like that, Harry?"

"Can you tell? It's bloody brilliant." For emphasis, he gently squeezed her bum and kissed the back of her neck; alternating the kisses with small love-bites. "You're the most beautiful girl in the world...and you're mine."

The possessiveness in his voice pleased her inordinately. It was what she desperately wanted to hear from him...that he DID want her and DID claim her. It was important that he was unafraid of doing so and of letting those who needed-to-know, know.

His last thought to her, before sleep claimed him, was "if this is how we react to being bonded, can you imagine what others might go through?"

Separately, Professors Snape and McGonagall swore quietly at their charges as they, too, prepared for bed. The waves of magic rolling and crashing around their charges' room were going to make it almost impossible to get uninterrupted sleep. Not only were both of their students sending out incredible amounts of magic in all directions, but much of it was hugely sexually charged. Both professors found themselves turned on beyond belief and unable to seek out their normal methods of release.

Finally, Johan Severus Snape could stand it no longer. Taking out a small, blue globe, he peered into it and said, "Love? I need you. Please come to me?"

The smiling face of Elizabeth "Poppy" Snape née Pomfrey looked out from the globe. "Where are you, love?"

"The Inn – Diagon Alley. Room 317."

One minute later, Johan Snape heard a knock at his door and rushed to meet it. He was greeted by the woman he had come to love and to whom he had been married for eleven years. She threw herself into his arms and kissed him soundly.

A wave – the fourth in the last ten minutes – crashed through the wall and captured them both in its embrace. The moment it hit, Elizabeth Snape knew why she had been called by her husband. She could feel his stone-hard erection pressing against her through his pants. She broke their kiss long enough to mutter, "No wonder you called, love. It's like a fucking aphrodisiac. Where's it coming from?"

"Harry Potter and his new wife, Hermione Potter née Granger."

"HUH? What do you mean?" she was stunned into silence for a moment. Harry Potter was important. Not just 'important' – that wasn't a strong enough word. He was the one who had brought down Voldemort the last time. That made him a hero in the vein of a 'single-handedly-saving-the-planet' kind. Sight unseen, she knew that she'd do anything that the boy needed, if it were in her power to do.

“James and Lily Potter’s SON – Harry – bonded with a girl that he met in Diagon Alley this afternoon. They’ve apparently been dreaming of each other for as long as either can both remember. The moment they met, they bonded. All they had to do was touch. I’m still trying to work out how that might be possible.”

“Share?”

Johan knew what his wife wanted. Pulling her wand free from its holster along the inside of her thigh, (she had never had been strong enough to do wandless magic), she pointed it at him and said, “Legillemens”. Instantly, she was transported into his thoughtscape. It was familiar to her because of all the time she had spent getting to know him that way.

The images of the afternoon’s events were pushed at her almost instantly; in chronological order. While it would have taken hours to actually experience the events, she was able to see all of the high points, without any editorial comments by him. Once she was satisfied that she had seen everything, she backed out of his mind. He felt her leave with a pop! As if she had apparated away.

“Anything else, love, that I should know about?”

“Well – just that Harry and Hermione seem to share their thoughts, along with feelings, emotions, memories without the benefit of additional magics. They’re in constant contact with each other. I’ve never seen two children stronger in their magic than those two are already. Not even Riddle or Dumbledore – and that’s saying something.”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“Nothing”

“Then why did you ask me to leave the hospital before the end of my shift?”

“Needed you”, he said, in his softest and best seductive voice.

“Oh?” She said, coquettishly. “And I don’t suppose that the big, bad potions teacher is going to tell me exactly what he needs?” She had no intent on making it any easier on him than was absolutely necessary. She knew exactly what her husband was looking for from her and she knew, too, that making him spell it out would double their eventual pleasure.

His smoky, dark eyes fixated on hers and bore into her soul. His considerable magical core was blazing full-tilt, as if someone had plugged him into some sort of massive power-circuit, and she realized that she wasn’t going to get much more out of him if she didn’t take care of the more the immediate, pressing problem that was currently throbbing in her outstretched hand.

His hands reached out and pulled her close; flying to the buttons of her blouse and undoing them with the barest flicker of effort. When he got to the final button, he tore at it roughly, so that the button was hanging by a thread as it came undone.

“Naked. Bed. Now” he said in her ear.

It was the last thing that was said between for many hours.

In Room 315, Minerva McGonagall – irritated by the crashing waves of erotic energy which were surging her way – looked at the mirror and sighed. If she reverted to her real form, she could be caught in a situation where she was needed by her charges and would have to oblivate possibly a very large number of people. If she didn’t revert, she wouldn’t be able to get out of the Inn and find the relief that she so desperately needed. That was the down-side of being what she was.

Finally, she decided that she could risk a trip back to Hogwarts and that more than likely; she’d be able to get back to the Inn in the morning, long before Harry and Hermione decided to rise.

Closing her eyes, she latched onto the image of her quarters at the school and disappeared; without a sound and without a trace. Being Merlin’s apprentice had its benefits. It was a shame that she could

never, ever tell anyone. The moment she arrived in her quarters, a familiar voice spoke into her mind. “Back so soon, love?”

“No, you old softy. NO, I’m back because of something that happened today. Something you’re going to want to hear about.”

“Come on up then. The bed’s cold and I’ve missed you.”

“Randy goat. You just want access to my bits.”

“Well, yes, but I’m cold, too. I’ve never, ever gotten used to the fact that this castle can get so cold at night, even at the height of summer.”

“Be right there, then.”

A moment later, she shimmered into existence in his sanctum sanctorum – which was actually a large, very carefully disguised interior portcullis – that could be used to trap anyone foolish enough to try to break into the Headmaster’s private residence. It had both lethal and non-lethal magical (as well as physical) defenses and could be turned, instantly, into hell-on-earth for an invader by the activation of a magical key or word-sequence. Minerva McGonagall was the only person who was keyed into the room’s defenses, such that she wasn’t attacked the moment she appeared.

Albus Dumbledore was sitting reading in a corner, under a particularly bright lamp, with Fawkes on his shoulder when she appeared. “Silent as ever, love. You picked up that trick nicely.”

“And well I should have, given how many times I saw you do it.”

“Are you going to change here or inside?”

The question was too late. Minerva McGonagall – Deputy Headmistress and stern taskmistress for Transfiguration – was already gone. In her place stood a naked, 20-ish year-old looking, flaming red-haired beauty with glowing green eyes and palpable magical aura.

“Never understood why you became a cat instead of the alternative. Would have been so much fun to fly with you.”

“Oh hush. I’m getting cold and you mentioned something about bed.”

“Oh, alright. If you insist.” Suddenly, Albus Percival Brian Wulfric Dumbledore was gone and in his place stood a tallish, lean, naked man of indeterminate age. Gone were the white beard and glasses; replaced by a full mane of almost coal-black hair and piercing blue eyes set in a chiseled, handsome, clean-shaved face.

She looked at him, very, very appreciative of his powerful, lean, compact form. He was truly magnificent to look at. Reaching out a hand, he pulled her to him and the two disappeared.

A moment later, both appeared next to a king-sized, heavy, solid rosewood sleigh; with a duvet done in blues and golds.

She smiled at it. It was his pride and joy, even if she had helped to pick out the fabrics for it (£600) and had brought him the down-filled pillows from her own, abundant, collection. The mattress itself was a fairly recent purchase (£1253.50) that she had made for him in the muggle world and was one of the best investments she had ever made. She had bought it at Harrods...which had, in turn, ordered it custom-made from a famous business in Salem, Massachusetts. Getting it to a remote castle in Scotland without anyone noticing? Priceless.

“Last one in!” she thought to him, as she climbed up into the high bed and snuggled under the covers.

“Impatient minx”

Rather than crawl over her (which he thought undignified), he walked around to the other side of the bed and crawled in. A wave of his hand and the few lights in the room dimmed considerably.

“Now, love, are you going to tell me what made you leave your charges and come all the way back here?” His body was warm against hers and she could already feel her tension starting to melt

away. It didn't hurt, of course, that he was infusing her with some of his own strength as she warmed up.

Rather than reply, she simply opened her mind to him. She felt bad that she was unable to tell Johan anything about her real abilities, but it would have ruined a great many carefully-laid plans and artifices if she had done so. She had to make sure that he was convinced that she wasn't anything other than what she looked. There were too many lives dependant on her secret – and that of the Headmaster – being kept. The chance of a secret getting out, as the Americans liked to say, was inversely proportional to the square of the number of people who knew it. Only one person knew her secret and he lay next to her.

The moment that she opened her mind to him, all of the images, sights, and sounds of the day poured out towards him. Even with his prodigious mind and amazing, magically-enhanced capacities, there was still a great deal to sort out.

The first thing that struck him was just how powerful Harry and Hermione's bond must be. He had predicted that such a bond would form, given the testing that he had done on the two of them, but it still astounded him that any two young people could have such incredible combined power. The second thing that he saw and experienced, other than Harry's surprise choice of a familiar, was his potions-masters' unfortunate lashing-out at the bookstore. Seeing the poor man land flat on his back after his own stunner struck him was, he had to admit, very funny...but it was also sad in a way. After more than ten years, Johan Severus Snape still tended towards impulsive. Impulsive behavior gets people killed. It was something that both Sun Tzu and Machiavelli had both pointed out in their own ways and the man called Albus Dumbledore knew that he very much needed the black-haired, emotionally conflicted potions-master alive and in control of himself if the 'plan' was going to work. Ollivander's comments about Harry and his wand drew some interest, because of how that specific choice ("The wand chooses the wizard, Mr. Potter") might affect some of the long and complex plans which had been carefully created over the years.

Snuggling around his wife, the Headmaster thought, "You came back here to tell me about their bonding and his familiar? Was that wise?"

"Fuck, no. I came back because I was horny. Still am. And so far, I've gotten nothing in the way of satisfaction. Now, are you going to help? or do I have to tie you down and take care of things myself?"

Her 'tone-of-voice' was humorous but had an edge of serious intent to it. "No need for force, love. I think I can take care of any need you might have."

"Get to it then! We've got until about 7:30 Am before Johan realizes that I'm not there and goes looking for me."

There was a tinkling of laughter in her thoughts that the Deputy-Headmistress distinctly off-guard. "I think you'll find that Johan will sleep in a bit tomorrow, if his charges allow it. I sent Elizabeth to him tonight to 'take care of things', as it were. I made sure the ward was empty and quiet before she left. She didn't suspect I had been there at all."

"Harrumph. If you were sending spouses around, why didn't you send for your own?"

There was a very pregnant pause between them, while he determined what his best response might be. Finally he said, "Because I was unsure whether you'd be 'in the mood', after being with Ms. Granger all day."

She tilted her head on the red and gold trimmed pillow and glared at him. "Well, I'm here now. Get busy! Not getting any younger and I'm STILL HORNY."

'Albus Dumbledore' bent himself, over the next several hours, to the task of pleasing the woman who had been his wife for more than a thousand years and to their mutual delight, was singularly successful at reminding her just how much he loved and needed her.

August 2nd, 7:47 Am. Room 316; The Inn at Diagon Alley.

Harry Potter awoke to the soft snoring. Then he felt the magical, warm presence next to him and realized that the night before had not, in fact, been a glorious dream. Hermione Jane Potter née Granger was still curled up in his arms. He was spooned around her and could feel the silkiness of her body against his.

Harry realized two things upon waking: one – his wife craved being touched and was not shy about asking for more and two – she was no longer wearing knickers. The latter fact was evidenced by the fact that his morning erection was now erotically nestled between the smooth, taut, highly-desirable cheeks of her bottom. It set his blood to thrumming and pounding in his ears.

How long they lay like that, Harry did not know. Neither of their professors had come in to roust them out of bed; even though the summer morning sun was streaming into one of the rooms' windows full-tilt. Finally, Hermione shifted against him and awoke with a start.

“Harry!”

His left hand left her breast and move up to cup her face. “Yes? Good morning. Sleep well?”

She shimmied her way on top of him, so that they were face-to-face and her small, but beautiful breasts were rubbing against his bare chest. Kissing him, she let go of any reserve she might have felt about the things they had done the night before and let her magic fully suffuse into him – just like he was doing to her. “Is it possible to love someone this quickly, Harry?”

His hands caressed her back and bottom while they kissed; distracting her enough so that he could think about his answer for a moment. “I don’t know, Hermione....but if it is, then I love you. I dreamt about you for so long...and now that you’re here, I know I’ll never let you go, if you’ll have me.”

She lost it. Bursting into tears, Hermione Jane Potter née Granger completely melted down on the young man who was holding her so lovingly. It alarmed Harry immensely, because he had never had the

need or requirement to sooth a crying girl before and was unnerved by the emotions that were roiling in her.

“What’s wrong?” he said to her as he swept away the tears that were gathering at the corners of her eyes.

Immediately his mind went to where she didn’t want him or didn’t want to be in a relationship. It was his coping mechanism – to assume that he was unwanted, because he always had been unwanted.

“Nothing love. Absolutely nothing. I’ve never been happier.”

“Why the tears?”

That stopped her tears, because she couldn’t cry and laugh at the same time. “It’s what girls do Harry. Sometimes we cry exactly because we’re happy. It’s a way of letting out the emotional energy.”

“Oh!” he thought to her. It was a wonder to him that happiness could cause tears.

“Harry? I will be yours forever, if you’ll have me. On my life and on my magic, I promise to love and protect you through good and bad; to keep myself for you and you alone, forever and ever. So Mote It Be. ”

Snaking his fingers up and into her wavy hair, Harry Potter brought his wife’s lips to his and in so doing, gave her the kiss that bound them both in their promises to each other. Harry knew what to say – what he wanted and needed to say. He could hear the words in his parents’ vows echoing in the visions he had seen from Professor Snape. “Yes. I love you, Hermione and I promise, on my life and on my magic, to love and protect you, as your friend and your husband; to keep myself for you and you alone, through good and bad, forever and ever. So Mote It Be.”

Neither saw the immense golden glow that filled the room at that moment. Neither felt the enormous pulse of pure, radiant, magical energy that went out from them in all directions because of the binding marital vows they had just given each other. Neither knew

that they had just changed the course of history and would change it yet again when they reached Hogwarts. Fate was just like that.

August 4th – 5:36 Am – just after sunrise in the communal fruit orchard near Ottery St. Catchpole, just outside Ottery St. Mary; Devon, UK.

“Have you got it?” the young blonde girl said, excitedly, as she saw her friend appear between two apple trees to her right.

Holding up her prize, the girl said, “Duh! Of course I got it, Luna. Mom was sound asleep last night, early, and I was able to go up to the attic and find it. She didn’t exactly make much effort to hide it. I don’t think she expected any of us to go up looking for it.”

“I’m glad you’re here, love. I’ve missed you these last couple of days.”

Ginevra Weasley looked at her best friend – her new lover – and was excited about what they were about to do. Ginny and Luna had both skipped a grade at the small wizarding primary school in the nearby hamlet of Fairmile and just gotten their acceptance letters for Hogwarts when their mutual problem figuratively hit them both over the head. Somewhere along the line, they had fallen in love and neither girl wanted anything to do with the attentions of the boys whom they’d have to face at Hogwarts. Ginny was particularly anti-boy, though she loved her brothers and her father dearly. She just didn’t see boys as being potential life-partners. Even the wondrous stories about the ‘Boy-who-lived’ had done nothing to stir her imagination...much to her mothers’ consternation and concern.

Luna, on the other hand, had grown up thinking that boys might someday be interesting to have as friends, even best friends, but that girls were softer, nicer and much gentler with her. Her father, Xenophilous, loved her very much and supported her in anything she decided to do – which is why, when she asked, had given her her mother’s old wand to use for the ritual that the two were about to perform.

“Do we sit or stand for this?” the young redhead asked, looking at the ground somewhat hesitantly. She was wearing her best dress – a

beautiful white silk, knee-length dress with small, round, blue pearlescent buttons down the front – and didn't want to get it dirty.

"I don't know. The trees are full of Nargles...so we want to be below them. It will be warmer if we sit on the blanket I brought. Did you bring the ring?"

Ginny nodded and dug into her small, clutch-purse, before extending her hand, palm-upward, and showing her lover the silver, twisted-knot ring which she had brought. The young, beautiful blonde's eyes widened with joy as she looked at the ring she'd soon be wearing.

"Did you?" the youngest Weasley asked?

Luna nodded and brought out, from a small, hidden pocket in her pale gold, fully lined, linen summer dress, a stunning ring of similar design, but wrought from 22kt. Gold, and inscribed with Feanorian letters. Ginny didn't recognize the letters at all, but was overwhelmed at the beauty of the ring. She could feel magic pulsing from it and was excited about wearing it.

Almost at once, the two girls took each others' hands and sat on the blanket, facing each other. Each held her wand in one hand and the ring she was giving in the other. Luna smiled and said, quietly, "Ginny, I love you. More than my mother sometimes and that frightens me. But it doesn't frighten me enough not to tell you that I want to be with you always. You've been my best friend since I can remember and you've never left me, even when the others were teasing me so badly. You stuck up for me and defended me – even when they hurt you for doing so. I want to give my life to you, if you will have me."

Ginny was already crying soft, happy tears. "I love you, Luna. Yes, I will have you...if you will have me. You've never left me, either, even when my brothers were teasing me so badly. You never made fun of my hair or my clothes, and you never, ever missed my birthday or Christmas, or anything. You were even there when my rabbit died and I had to bury it. You are my best friend."

Luna smiled and took her lovers' wand-tip in her hand. "Ginevra Molly Weasley, I swear, on my magic and on my life, to protect you, love

you, cherish you, and be for you and you only, in this life and in the next, so Mote It Be.”

The wand-tip flared to life with magic and for a moment, the young blonde girl was surrounded by a corona of visible magic. Ginny thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

When the corona dissipated, Ginny took the ring she was holding and slipped it onto her lovers’ left ring-finger. The ring automatically shrank to fit and the moment it did so, Luna began crying, too.

When it was her turn, Ginny reached out and took Luna’s wand-tip in the palm of her hand. She began simply. “Luna Marie Lovegood, I love you. I promise to love and protect you forever. You are my best friend and my one and only lover. I promise to be for you and you only; in the good and in the bad, forever and ever. So Mote It Be.”

The same corona which had surrounded Luna leapt up and around Ginny; creating a powerful, almost painfully bright halo. Even as the magic pulsed, Luna slipped the golden band onto her bond-mate’s finger and sighed happily as the ring shrank to fit her. The ritual was complete, save for the most important step. Eyes bright with tears, the two girls leaned forward and shared their very first kiss as a bonded couple. It was a kiss no less magical or powerful than the kiss that had been shared not two days earlier in an alley north and west of where they sat.

It was from that moment on, that anywhere one looked in that orchard, they would know that the trees were imbued with a special magic. Taller, stronger, greener, and more vibrant than their cousins anywhere else in Britain, the orchards’ trees would forever be known as special and worthy of protection.

August 5th – 6:14 Pm - 57 Mill Lane, Nonington-in-Kent, Kent, UK

Hermione Jane Potter looked at her watch and hoped that her parents would be home soon. She wanted whatever confrontation might occur to happen while the sun was still up and her two professors could still get her away, safely, to Hogwarts, and to Harry. They had not been separated from more than a half-hour and already,

the lack of his touch was grating on her nerves. Her whole body was alive with need. It was as if she was on skag or something.

Just as she was about to give up hope and ask the Deputy-Headmistress who was standing behind her in the driveway to take her back to Harry, her parents' dark green BMW 3 Series Touring Sedan pulled into the driveway. This time, however, her parents came bounding over to her and took her in their arms.

"Hello, pumpkin! It's good to have you home. We thought you'd be home two days ago, but then your letter arrived – your mother and I are never going to get used to using birds to deliver mail – and we saw how you had been delayed."

Hermione gave her father another squeeze and then turned to her mother – who also gave her a huge hug. "Hello, precious. I've missed you. The house is too quiet at night, with you not around. More so than I thought it would be."

"I love you, Mom, and I wish I could stay....but I can't. That's why I'm here. I need to tell you both something."

Her mother looked at her, suddenly concerned. "What is it, Poppet?" her father asked, as he stepped closer to the two of them. He didn't see the two wands being drawn surreptitiously by the magical professors nearby and didn't realize that his every action was being watched.

Hermione looked at her parents and tears started forming at the edge of her eyes. "Mom, Dad. I'm...married. There's a young boy....Harry. I've been dreaming about him my whole life. I finally met him four days ago and when I did, we, I guess you could say we bonded. That's what it's called in the magical world. We both realized that we'd always been looking for each other. The moment we touched...". Hermione stopped. She didn't know what to do about the looks of horror on her parents' faces. She did, however, see her father looking towards his car and her mother following his eyes.

"NO!" Hermione screamed. Her parents never made it to the car. Both fell to stunners from the professors.

Rushing over, she knelt next to her parents' bodies. They were both still breathing and seemed to be fine – but neither was going to revive anytime soon, without help.

"That could'a gone better, lass. Thank you for warning us. What were they trying to do?"

Looking up, Hermione eyed her transfiguration professor. "They were going for their handguns. They have special permits from the Government to carry them, because of the drugs they work with at their office."

"I'm sorry, lassie. We can't risk reviving them and we can't let you be apart from Harry, even if you wanted to be. You'll have to write them a note and explain to them what's happened, so that when they wake up, they'll at least know you're safe."

Johan Severus Snape stepped closer and knelt down, so that he could help the young girl re-position her parents' bodies. If they were going to sleep outdoors for a while, they might as well be comfortable. Hermione opened the car and removed a traveling blanket from the boot, and then fixed it into a make-shift pillow for them.

Once she was sure that they were going to be all right, she went inside and retrieved paper and pen, so that she could write them a letter. The anxiousness she had felt earlier was at an alarming thrum throughout her body and she knew she was pressed for time.

Writing quickly, Hermione explained everything that had happened to her, including her exchange of vows with Harry. She didn't leave out many details, though there were a few – including those about her sleeping arrangements – that she felt her parents didn't need to know. Also left out was any mention of where the school was (she didn't really know) and when she'd be back, though she mused in her letter that she'd like to share Christmas with them, if she was still welcome – but that she'd have her husband with her and that he needed to feel welcome, or she couldn't come home.

She told them how much she loved them and how proud she was to be their daughter...and that they shouldn't worry about her, since she was under extraordinarily good protection by her teachers (and her husband, who was going to be an amazingly powerful wizard once he was trained).

She closed the letter by telling them that she'd entered a new world and that she was overwhelmed by it, but anxious to explore it totally. She promised pictures when she could and lots of letters, even if they didn't want to write back.

She signed it, "Love, your daughter always, Hermione Jane Potter"

Satisfied, she handed it up to her professors, who took turns reading it, before they rolled it into a neat, tight scroll and placed it into Hermione's mothers' hand. The three looked at each other and, just like they had before, Hermione held hands with the two and disappeared silently.

Several hours later, it was full dark and Jake and Miranda Granger awoke, side by side, in their driveway. Immediately, they noticed two things. One – Hermione was no longer there, and two – Miranda was clutching a rolled-up note that she had not been holding before.

They sat up and she unfurled the note, holding it in front of them both so that they could read it simultaneously in the bright light of the large garage flood-lights, which had flicked on when it caught their movement. When they were done, they sat amazed but saddened at all they had been told.

Miranda leaned in close to her husband as she cried at what she perceived as their loss of a daughter's companionship and love. "Do you think she'll ever come home again?"

Jake, ever the practical one, said, "I think, when she does, that it would probably be best for all concerned if all weapons were securely put away, first. I think I'd be less tempted."

Miranda hit him in the arm. Not hard, but enough to tell him that his attempt at humor was not welcome. "Jake...they could easily kill you.

I'm not sure you really understanding what we're dealing with, but that woman, McGonagall, has more power in her than all of the bobbies in the local departments put together. I'm pretty sure that she's afraid of little or nothing. And if Hermione's right, this Harry that she's married to will be even more powerful than that. Do you really think that antagonizing them is a good idea? Even if it's a joke?"

Her tone was serious and there was no humor in it. "No, I suppose not" he said. "What are we going to do then?"

She buried her face in his chest. "I don't know, Jake. I just don't know."

8:28 Pm, August 15th, Guest quarters, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Harry and Hermione Potter sat on the edge of their queen bed, silently talking and working through what had happened to them that day. No progress had been made towards getting into bed because they had just returned from dinner with the Headmaster and Deputy-Headmistress of the school and the experience left them with a great many questions. Because of their unfamiliarity, and because of Albus Dumbledore's and Minerva McGonagall's reputations and their standing in the wizarding world, it had been more than a little uncomfortable, but both Harry and Hermione had agreed to it because they both felt grateful to the Headmaster for having sent Professor Snape to bring him out of his uncles' home.

More, going into the dinner, both Hermione and Harry had been cognizant of what Johan had told Harry the day before, when the two had been in the number two green-house, collecting fresh plant cuttings for a potion that they were working on together. "Harry, you may or not feel comfortable at first around the Headmaster or the Headmistress. They've been alive for many, many years and they see and know things that elude the rest of us. If they seem aloof or they appear to not want to answer your questions, it's because they are concerned about seeing you have to bear burdens for which you are not yet ready. If anything, they are always guilty of caring too much, rather than too little.

I want you to know that I know all too well what was done to you by your aunt and uncle – because I saw your memories of what you went through - and I will do everything in my power to make sure that you are never, ever hurt like that again. Your safety and your happiness, to the extent that I can make it possible, are my concern. The Headmaster has given me a free hand. You are emancipated now...which means that you are free of the restrictions on the use of underage magic. The same goes for Hermione, as she is your bond-mate and therefore also emancipated.”

Harry had again (to the potion-master’s embarrassment) hugged him in thanks. “You know that you cannot do that, Harry, once school has started.”

The sadness on Harry’s face was sufficient evidence that he was aware of the change that would have to overtake their relationship once the term began. “I’m sorry, Harry. I really am. These last eleven days have been incredible for me. You and your bride have already learned so much and worked so hard that I really am going to have to step up my teaching efforts significantly, if I’m going to challenge you both at all.”

Harry inclined his head slightly, as if listening to something. “Told you, Hermione. I told you that all he wants is for us to work really hard for him and that he’d teach us a lot!”

“I know, Harry. I know. And I’m grateful. At least this way, I won’t go into the term thinking I’m a million miles behind everyone else.”

“You’ll always be smarter than me, love”, Harry thought to her.

A snapping of fingers brought Harry back to focus. “Harry, you can’t tune out someone like that. It’s not polite. Besides, if I didn’t know what was happening, I’d have thought you were ill or something. Your eyes glaze over when you’re talking to Hermione like that.”

That caught Harry up short. “I’m sorry, Johan. Please forgive me. I didn’t realize....”

“I know, Harry. I know. Don’t apologize unnecessarily, though. The fact that you can share thoughts with your bond-mate like that is something that you should cherish. Just...be careful about how and when you do it. It would certainly upset some in the wizarding world who don’t and can’t ever share that gift. There are blood-purists who think that such sharing is a gift that only THEY have and they would be very angry with you and Hermione if they found out that it was otherwise.”

“We’ll be careful, Johan. We both promise.”

“Done then, Harry. I’ll say no more about it. Now, back to the Headmaster and Headmistress...”

Johan Snape took out a pair of dragon-hide gloves and motioned for Harry to do the same. Once they were both protected, the older man moved towards the evil-looking cactus-type plant at the far end of the green-house. With the sheers, he made two very deft cuts at the base of one of the forward leaders of the plant and cut it away completely; letting it fall into a catch-basin that was already in place. Suddenly, the cut piece started to ooze a truly foul-smelling reddish-grey sap.

“See, Harry? That’s why you have to work fast with this one. The Ochre Cactus is one of the oldest plant-types that we grow here. It’s from the United States southwest and it makes incredible numbing agents. In concentrated doses though...”

“It creates a potion capable of creating pain not unlike the cruciatus curse.”

“Very good, Harry. That’s it exactly. Now, make your cut of that other leader – the one on the left, and then catch it like I have. Once you’ve done that, we’ll go back up to the lab and you and Hermione can show me what you’ve learned about cleaning and purifying the ochre.”

Harry did as he was asked and in exactly the way he had been shown. He felt that it wasn’t too different than trimming the rose bushes at his aunt and uncles’ house, except that this plant was far more unforgiving if a person made a mistake with it.

Once the small branch fell into the catch-basin – which Harry noticed, with curiosity, was made of plastic - Harry turned to his master. “Johan? May I ask a personal question?”

“What is it, Harry? You’ve not been shy about asking before.”

“It’s about my mother.”

“I see. Well, I can’t promise you a complete answer, necessarily, but go ahead and ask.”

“Well, I was wondering....if you loved my mother and she loved you, why didn’t you marry? You said something when you rescued me about your mother controlling the money in your family and that’s why you couldn’t marry my mother.”

Nodding, Johan Severus Snape leaned back against one of the workbenches behind him. “It was more than that, Harry. I couldn’t marry your mother not just because of money. If it had been only that, I would have renounced the family and married her anyway. No, the real reason that I couldn’t marry your mother is that my mother threatened to curse us both with a terrible, unforgiveable curse – one that renders both people sterile, mute, deaf, and blind – so that they can never hear, see, or speak to their lover and can never have children together. It’s old, family magic. I doubt that there’s even a counter-curse. My mother’s parents, as well as her brothers, were never ones to second-guess themselves, especially when it came to getting their way. I could not bring myself to see that happen to Lily. I loved her too much for that.”

Harry was shocked. He had never imagined that someone could do that to another person, simply because of the person that he/she had come to love.

“When I told your mother about the threat, she told me that she would never forget me, and would never forgive my mother for separating us. Unfortunately, by the time my mother finally passed away, it was too late. The friendship that Lily had always shared with James had become a great deal more and he finally recognized how much he

loved her. When they came and told me that James had proposed, I was truly happy for them, because it meant that Lily would be protected by someone I knew was up to the job and who loved her as much as I did.”

It was as if a great burden had been lifted from Harry’s shoulders and he felt a kind of peace that he had not expected.

“You were willing to sacrifice your own happiness for my mother’s safety.” Harry said, almost like he was just stating any other fact.

Snape shook his head. “I wish it were so easy, Harry. The truth is more than that. The truth is that I was a coward and had too much ego to risk being so cursed. I didn’t think I could fight the curse or reverse it, no matter how long I tried, and I thought I was too good a wizard to have my talents ‘wasted’ trying to find a counter-curse, no matter how long I searched.”

It was a futile effort, to fight the tears that were gathering at the corners of his eyes, Harry found.

“Don’t cry for me, Harry. I don’t deserve it. If I had been more of a wizard, I would have killed my mother – god knows she deserved it - and then gone and married your mother anyway.”

Wiping away the tears, Harry said, “I’m not. I was just thinking about Hermione.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I presumed.... I thought that, perhaps, you’d been thinking about your mother and what might have been. That will teach me to assume too much.”

A wane smile occupied Harry’s countenance momentarily and then fled. Snape looked at him and realized that the boy was starting to shake. “Time to get back up to the castle and get you back with Hermione. It’s been more than thirty minutes and I’m sure she’s in no better condition than you are.”

All Harry could do was nod and then gather the things they need to bring back to the potions lab for processing. The sooner he was with her, the better-off he would be.

Despite the conversations that were shared between the potions-master and his two new, favorite students, no further information about the Headmaster or the Deputy-Headmistress was forthcoming and both Hermione, and to lesser degree, Harry, wondered what else they should know about the two powerful figures.

In the days that were left to them, Hermione and Harry learned the lay-out of the castle and grounds and delved deeply into their books. It was a competition, of sorts, to see how much progress they could make each day, without feeling like they were losing out on 'vacation' time.

Two activities, in particular, enthralled them. The first was completely unexpected and would not have been believable to Hermione's parents, even if they had witnessed it with their own eyes.

In the high heat of the afternoon, the pair found themselves, inevitably, down by the lake. After some initial hesitancy on Harry's part, the two swam out to a depth that was comfortable, but not so deep that they couldn't still stand up if they had to.

It was Harry who first felt the touch of something large and solid by his leg. Screaming, he swam for the shore, with Hermione in hot pursuit. It was not fast enough and soon, Harry found himself hoisted high out of the water, with a massive, green-brown tentacle wrapped around his body. Panic was setting in when a voice boomed from the shore. "You've got to stroke it gently and then he'll let you go!"

Harry looked up to see a truly massive, 9 ft. high, bearded man calling and waving to him. Since he didn't have any alternative, Harry did as the man suggested and sure enough, the tentacle set him back in the water and then withdrew.

Hermione looked in relief as Harry swam to the shore. Not waiting until he was fully out, she flung herself at him and hugged him tight.

“Oh god, Harry. I could feel how scared you were and how worried you were that I’d be hurt. I love you.”

“Love you too, Hermione. I was scared...more so than I’ve been in a long time. Whatever that was, it was huge.”

The man reached out and pulled Harry out of the water easily. “All right there? Betcha didn’t know that the squid likes to play. ‘Specially since it’s so warm out. He’s right friendly. I’ve fed him for years with fish I’ve caught. I can usually call him right to the shore, if I need to.”

A silent contest ensued in Harry’s gut over whether he’d ever have the courage to ‘play’ with such an animal and almost immediately, he decided that the answer was a straight-forward ‘not in this lifetime’.

Hermione eyed the massive man up and down and then said, “I know who you are! You’re Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of keys and grounds for Hogwarts! You’re famous.”

“Well, am I now? I’d heard no such thing, missy. Tell me, what am I famous for?”

“You’re in Hogwarts: A History, 27th Edition. You have the largest herd of Thestrals anywhere in the world. Not just Thestrals, but a herd of Unicorns and Hippogriffs as well. Everyone knows who you are!”

Closing his eyes, Harry let the information Hermione was thinking about pour into his mind. She helped by pushing images of the Unicorns and Hippogriffs at him. She also shared with him the fact that an individual can see Thestrals only if he or she has seen someone die.

“Thanks, love. You’re wonderful at that.”

Hermione squeezed Harry’s hand gently in a silent reply.

Rubeus Hagrid smiled down at the diminutive, bushy-haired girl. “That’s right nice to know, missy. Now, tell me your names. I don’t

usually see students here during the summer, so sumptin' tells me you two are special."

Unsure of whether he should go first or second, Harry cleared his throat; drawing the Grounds-keepers' attention. "I'm Harry Potter, sir. This is my wife, Hermione."

That caught the huge man up short. "Your wife, you say? And how would that be, my young friend?"

It took a moment before what Harry had said caught up with the man. "Harry? Harry Potter? You're parents were Lily and James!" Almost immediately, the giant man started crying. "I've not seen you since I carried you from your parents' burning house, when you were just a wee bairn!"

Using a handkerchief that was the size of a small table-cloth which he had pulled from one of his pants-pockets, Rubeus Hagrid blew his nose and dried the tears that had spilled down his beard. "Oh Harry...I can't believe you're here! You've gotta tell me all that's happened to you. I knew you'd be a fine wizard, once you were trained up a bit and now it's happening..."

"I wouldn't be doing so well if it weren't for Hermione, Hagrid" Harry said, trying to deflect all of the attention away.

That led to an hour-long discussion about what had happened to bring the two of them to Hogwarts, without going into what had become of the Dursleys or what Harry's life had been like before his rescue. Harry also told him about his familiar and his wish that he could get an owl, too. The grounds-keeper smiled to himself for a moment and then turned back to the conversation.

At some point, Harry turned away as Hagrid and Hermione continued to talk, and looked out over the water. A massive tentacle broke surface and waved lazily back and forth and it reminded him to ask what Hagrid had started to go on about regarding the creature in the water. Turning back, Harry looked at him. "Hagrid, you said that the creature in the water likes to play. Exactly what did you mean by that?"

“Oh, yea. It’s a squid, Harry. A massive squid. I’ve never seen all of it, but its tentacles are almost 100 feet long, so it’s huge. The thing is, it seems to like Hogwarts and it’s always been in the lake here. Can’t rightly say how old it is, but the former groundskeeper used to feed it too and his notes say that it was just as big when he was here. That was more than fifty years ago.”

“But you said it likes to play, Hagrid.”

Stroking his beard, “Well, yes. It does. It will pick you up and toss you high in the air, if you gently touch the undersides of its tentacles. The more you do it, the more it will play with you. I think that it thinks it’s a game or something. I’ve seen ten or more students out swimming and playing with him at one time. He’ll never hurt you, though. I think the Headmasters apply a charm every so often to make sure, but I don’t know for certain.”

The dare-devil in Harry thought that sounded like fun...while the voice in his head told him in no uncertain terms that she didn’t want her husband hurt doing something so....foolish.

“Hermione, I love you....but doesn’t it sound like fun? It would be like going to the water-park with your parents, only with no parents around. If Hagrid says that no one’s ever been hurt, shouldn’t that be enough?”

She thought about that and then realized that what Harry said was true and that there wasn’t really a reason to fight it. “At least promise me you’ll do it when there’s a teacher around. I can’t....”

“I can’t lose you either, Hermione. I need you, too.”

Getting Hagrid’s attention for a moment, she said, “Excuse me for one moment. I need to talk to Harry about something.”

He waved them away, with a gesture that was dismissive, but friendly. “Away with you two. Go have fun. I’ve got to tend the gardens, anyways. Be good.”

Hermione turned and threw herself at Harry, not withstanding the fact that she was wearing a very revealing bathing-suit for a girl her age. "I wanted to tell you how much you mean to me, Harry and I didn't want eyes on us."

"I think we need some snuggle-time, too. Beach tree? Or our room?"

"Beach tree. I'm still white as a sheet and the sun feels great."

After a two-minute walk, they found themselves at what was to become their tree. Its roots were far enough across that a blanket fit nicely between them and it faced out towards the lake; sheltering them enough that they couldn't be seen from anywhere in the school.

Soon, both were asleep; wrapped in each others' arms, as the warm sun poured down on them. The next day, to their dismay, the need for an effective sunscreen prompted their next lessons in potions class and Johan Severus Snape was heard laughing like mad later on at his students' expense as he retreated down a corridor and towards the professors' common lounge.

Chapter three comes soon. Students return and things grow more interesting. Please review!

From chapter two:

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On the highest hill overlooking Malfoy Manor – near the forest of Lockfoot, England; Early afternoon, August 12th

One thing about being the only son of Lucius Malfoy was one would learn caution. Not just caution, but extreme caution. Untraceable wands, privacy wards, poisons, and traps were all part and parcel of being a Malfoy. Each generation struggled to learn its way...to find out what was necessary to know in order to survive.

Draco Malfoy was not particularly brave. He didn’t like the sight of blood and he was not capable of “dark” magic the way that his father wanted him to be. That was part of the problem. Added to that was the fact that even at age eleven, was the knowledge that he was just not smart enough to be his father’s successor. He was not very good with traps and though he was decent at potions, he didn’t have the dedication necessary to be great at them...which meant that he’d never master the use of poisons and such they way he really needed to do. Warding – creating runestones and ward-stones - he could do, but not well enough to be really secure and Arithmancy was almost completely beyond his capabilities, because of the intricate and

complex math that it required in order to be really good at it. That meant that he would die – probably by a freak ‘accident’ and be replaced by a son adopted from one of the minor houses associated with House Malfoy; probably sooner than later.

Draco Aragonis Malfoy – the last of that name – had one, just one, redeeming secret. He was loved - loved by the one girl who understood him in the entire world. She was his playmate from his very youngest days and the one person who could really make him smile. Daphne Alexandra Greengrass. She was his ‘better half’ and he loved her very, very much. More than anyone else in the world, because she knew his heart and was willing to help him and support him in everything he tried. When he flew his broom, she was along side him; watching and coaching. When he practiced magic, she worked along side him – reading and deciphering the magic contained in the Greengrass family chronicles and tomes. They learned together and gave to each other the best kinds of incentives to keep trying; even when it was hard. Daphne had a greater affinity for magic...that was without doubt. What Draco had, and had in abundance, was the ability to completely, totally shield his mind. More, Draco Malfoy could completely mask his magic, so that no one else could detect him. With the help of a disillusionment spell and cloak of invisibility, he could totally disappear. He was completely untraceable – even to the most powerful dark wizards living. More than once, he had hidden from his father and the Dark Lord’s former inner-most circle when they were trying to make sure that their meetings were ‘undetected’ and had sat and listened to the murder and mayhem that they plotted.

Knowledge of those meetings and of the real identities of every single one of the remaining ‘death eaters’ made Draco a threat to his father and all that the elder Malfoy desired in life. Lucius Malfoy did not like threats...especially if they came from his own son. But Narcissa Malfoy née Black was an even larger, if secret, threat – at least insofar as young Draco was concerned – and the only threat about which Lucius Malfoy could do nothing. She held the money and all of the cards if anything happened. It was in their marital contract and both were bound by its blood-promises. Only those promises kept young Draco alive.

Of course Draco had heard all the speeches that his father made about 'blood purity' and 'pure-blood' wizarding pride and sometimes he did wonder if some of it was true. Other times though, Draco thought it was not. Certainly, his best friend Daphne was no 'true' pure-blood – one of her grandmothers was a muggle from the States - and she didn't seem in the least restrained in her magic or in her life by the dint of her ancestry. Draco wondered, too, if magic didn't have a great deal more to do with how hard a person worked at learning it rather than those to whom the person was born. Certainly Lucius was powerful...but was he more powerful than Albus Dumbledore, the famed head of Hogwarts? Everyone thought that Dumbledore was the most powerful wizard alive. The Aurors were powerful, too...and Draco knew several who were 'Muggle-born'...or as his father liked to call them: mudbloods. He didn't know if they were more powerful than his father, but he knew that his father seemed pretty afraid of them and kept talking about not wanting Aurors interfering with his private 'business'.

This day was special to Draco. Not just because of the fact that it was Daphne's birthday but because this day, August 12th, was going to be the day that he and the girl he loved bonded. They had looked up every conceivable thing they could find on ways to make their friendship stronger and make it so that their parents, or at least Draco's father, could not break them apart. Finally, they both realized that the only way to do that is to make marital vows to each other.

When Daphne had first brought it up, Draco laughed at it. But then, when he saw the tears in her eyes and asked her why she was crying...it was as if a dam broke loose for both of them. Daphne threw herself into his arms and buried her face in the crook of his neck and, like he had done so often before, he held her tight and rocked back and forth with her.

"It's not that I don't want to do the vows" he said to her, "It's just that I'm scared, too. What will your parents say?"

Without lifting her face, Daphne told him that she had already gotten permission to do it, and that her parents were not asking for a bride-price, given the circumstances...which made it so neither had any encumbrances to keep them from promising themselves to the other.

Draco was shocked at the fact that the Greengrasses were neither asking for anything nor doing anything to keep her away from him. An older and wiser version of himself might have heard at least a few alarm bells going off because of that fact, but the young, less hesitant Draco did not.

This day though, Draco wore his best dress robe and waited for his love to appear. He didn't know how she was planning on arriving, but an hour before the ritual of bonding, he had magically built a pentagram and then inscribed within it a small devotional circle at the top of the hill they had chosen, with the crests of the Greengrasses and the Malfoy's side by side, and waited at its center. To the west, there was an unobstructed view of Loch Lochrutton and to the east, the Lockfoot Forest. Many summer evenings, covered by disillusionment charms and notice-me-not charms, he and Daphne had played broom-tag over the loch with some of her friends. It was for that reason – the memories of the freedom he had always felt with her – and for the fact that he loved her more than anyone else in the world, that Draco Malfoy planned to defy his parents and bond with the only girl he would ever love.

At 1:55 Pm, there were two separate, almost silent 'pop' sounds off to his right and Draco turned, wondering who could be apparating so near-by. It took only a moment to see that it was Daphne and both her mother and father, as well as Amelia Bones, the Head of the DMLE.

The profound cold that solidified in the pit of Draco's stomach could scarcely be described. It was almost bone-chilling fear. He had expected Daphne, and Daphne alone to be arriving. Not her parents and most certainly not an outside guest. Worse, the guest was none other than the head of all magical law enforcement in Great Britain.

"Draco?"

"Daph?" he replied, quietly.

"It's alright, Draco. Mom and Dad said they couldn't miss this and they thought that we'd appreciate having Minister Bones do our

bonding, so that your father couldn't argue about the form or witness or anything."

Stupefied, Draco wondered how he had missed thinking about those particular details. Surely, those were grounds sufficient to challenge a bonding or to dissolve one, if necessary. How then did he miss considering them? Shaking his head, Draco Aragonis Malfoy walked over to the girl he loved and took her hands, so that he could escort her back to the devotional circle.

"You sure about this Daphne?"

Smiling, she looked at him. He was wearing his very best for her, just as she had done for him. "Yes Draco, I'm very, very sure. You know I love you."

Amelia Bones looked down at the pair and smiled. "Well you two, let's talk a bit before we do this. First, I want you to know that I am proud of the two of you. Draco...I'm proud of you for being willing to take this step and make this commitment. It's a lifetime promise of loyalty, love, and faithfulness and it's not to be entered into with anything less than absolute surety."

Daphne reached over and took Draco's hand and brought it to her, so that it encircled her waist and brought the two side by side. The light yellow, silk summer dress sparkled in the sun, where its rays caught the semi-precious stones that had been fashioned into buttons down the front.

"Ok, second, Daphne – I'm proud of you because you talked to both of your parents and didn't try to hide what you were planning. You carefully explained what you were feeling and why and what it all meant to you. That shows maturity way beyond your eleven years. I am glad that I could be a part of this today and I'm pleased that both of you were able to do so much by yourselves to get to this point. It's going to be my pleasure to bond the two of you. Now...Mr. and Mrs. Greengrass. Do either of you have anything to say?"

She turned to the waiting parents and invited them into the proceedings by the look on her face. Mrs. Greengrass was crying, but

the tears seemed to be really happy ones. Draco saw her and wondered how one fit the concepts of 'happy' and 'tears' into the same sentence without creating intellectual chaos. He looked at Daphne and she shook her head in a sign that he knew well. It meant "Don't even bother to try to figure it out. I can't."

"Well then, Draco, Daphne. Let's get this done. I'd rather have it done than have Lucius show up and have the pixie amongst the Kneazles."

Both Daphne and Draco nodded their emphatic agreement with that statement.

"Now, rings?"

Daphne and Draco both summoned small, blue-velvet boxes and gave them to Amelia.

"Very well then. Join hands and answer me this."

The young couple held hands and looked into each others' eyes as the Head of the DMLE asked her fateful questions. "Do you, Daphne Alexandra Greengrass; promise to take in love Draco Aragonis Malfoy, and further promise, on your life and on your magic, to love and protect him, as your friend and your husband; to keep yourself only for him and him alone, through all good and bad, in this life and in the next?"

"I do!"

A pulsing golden streamer that felt really warm to the touch wound itself over and between their wrists, binding them together. It felt alive to both of them and it felt right.

As her parents looked on with understanding and love, Daphne took the ring from Amelia's proffered hand and slid it onto Draco's ring finger, where it re-sized itself and momentarily flared with magical light.

"Now, do you, Draco Aragonis Malfoy, promise to take in love Daphne Alexandra Greengrass, and further promise, on your life and

on your magic, to love and protect her, as your friend and your wife; to keep yourself only for her and her alone, through all good and bad, in this life and in the next?"

"I do!"

Draco took the beautiful diamond ring, which he had 'expropriated' from the vast jewelry collection that his father had squirreled away in one of the basement safes and slid it onto his beloved's finger. The ward-runes which Draco himself had inscribed on the inside of the ring found her magic and bonded with it, giving her all the protection that Draco could conjure for her.

The two turned and looked at Amelia, expectant and happy. "Then, by my authority as head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for the Kingdom of Great Britain, and by the Grace of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth the Second, I declare you husband and wife. SO MOTE IT BE!"

With those magical words, a second, deeper and more radiant red ribbon joined with the first; fused into it and bound them together. The ribbons seemed to melt into their skin...and in so doing, drew them together for their first kiss as a bonded couple.

"I love you, Daphne", Draco thought as he kissed her.

"I love you too, Draco. Forever" came her reply. Then her eyes became very wide indeed as they separated and she looked at him. Not a sound escaped from either of them. "Did you just tell me you loved me?" she thought, as 'loudly' as she could.

"Yes! Now be quiet. You're yelling in my head!"

With that, the two jumped up and down in joy and hugged each other. Tears flowed down Daphne's face, even as her heart felt like it grew by three extra sizes. Draco wiped at the corner of his own eye and suddenly realized that he knew exactly what was meant by 'happy tears'.

Ministry for Magic; Magical Records Department; 2:30 Pm., August 12th\

Magical record-keeping, like many other professions, takes diligence and high levels of professionalism. More, those who populated the records-keeping department knew that their jobs represented a significant wall between an organized, productive society and total, complete chaos.

One of the most important sets of records in the entire department was the one that listed all of the currently bonded couples in the country. From it came all of the projections of live births and from that came the all-important census projection. The census projection was the holy grail of records, because it helped (better than any other tool) to measure whether the population of magical Britain was still viable. Viability, for a magical population, meant more than thirty-thousand bonded couples. That was the level at which there was sufficient magical (and genetic) diversity to keep the population healthy. Below that was an ever-devolving, downwardly-spiraling society that would eventually die under the weight of its own needs. Societies that don't have sufficiently diverse populations become inbred and lethargic, as well as increasingly cannibalistic. Magical societies that become inbred usually descend into a fatal civil war in fairly short order – usually in less than one hundred years.

On this particular day, the (current) book that was being used to record newly bonded couples had four new entries. Two were young couples in London who were married at the Ministry itself, in large, public ceremonies. Another was a small, private ceremony on the shore of Roath Park Lake, in the town of Roath, just outside Cardiff. The final one was that of Draco and Daphne. While it was unusual that two people would be bonded at such a young age, it wasn't outside the realm of possibility and so it didn't set off any alarms.

The current Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry wasn't any different than the more than 100,000 other magical people in Great Britain (including the society-page reporters of the Daily Prophet) insomuch as he didn't know the contents of the bonded-couple records and would have to work very hard indeed to

gain access to it. Even in his capacity as the Head of the Wizengamot, Albus Dumbledore did not have the right to arbitrarily access government records and thus, would remain in the dark about what had happened. Ignorance was the price paid for not having quietly co-opted someone in the records department.

Fortunately for Draco and Daphne; what worked against Dumbledore also worked against Lucius Malfoy.

In the Sun room – at the home of Astoria and Edgar Greengrass, August 12th, 3:35 Pm.

To say that Draco Malfoy was not comfortable was the understatement of the year. He'd just married (with their consent) the eldest daughter of the über-wealthy businessman, Edgar Greengrass and now she, the eldest daughter, was sitting on his lap, with her arms around him, as they chatted with her parents. It was surreal.

After putting down his snifter of Macallan 55 Year-Old, in-Lalique scotch, which Daphne silently informed Draco costs her father over 10,100 quid, Edgar Greengrass eyed Draco. "What are your plans now, Draco? I hear that getting away could be really good for a young person this time of the year. Have you considered the climate in say...southern Scotland, for instance?"

"Yes sir, I have. Actually, there's a really nice castle up that way that might be just the place for the two of us to take a honeymoon of sorts. I hear that the area is very secure and a good place to go if you're trying to get away from things for a while and maybe get a new perspective."

"Well then, Draco. I'm delighted. Is there anything that my wife and I might offer in terms of small luxuries that the two of you could take with you that might make the trip a bit easier? I know that those kinds of trips can get unexpectedly prolonged and there's no sense in the two of you not being able to enjoy yourselves."

Draco smiled, as did Daphne. It had been obvious from the get-go that what her father was talking about was the two of them getting away to Hogwarts before Draco's father could do anything about the marriage. Suggesting southern Scotland was brilliant, as far as the two of them were concerned, because that's where Hogwarts lay. The bit about 'small luxuries' referred to a good broom; a supply of things like potions that might otherwise be hard to come by; and whatever else a young couple might need for an extended trip of say....10 months.

The nice thing about the entire conversation, from Draco's vantage-point was that even under a serious mind-scan, Edgar Greengrass could be shown talking about nothing more than a honeymoon of indeterminate length – which was a perfectly legitimate thing to be discussing with his daughter and new son-in-law.

Thinking that discretion is the greater part of valor, Daphne and Draco both decided that they out to leave as soon as possible. Daphne already knew how to make port-keys, because of one of her aunts; who works in the Department of Magical Transportation, had taught her the three things that all field apparition teachers knew: You have to either have seen the place perfectly (in a high-quality photograph or in person) or have seen someone else's memory of the place, or have a very strong emotional connection to a person at that location.

Daphne had a deep and emotional connection to Hogwarts because of her eldest sister and so making the port-key was easy. Once they were all packed, Daphne spent a last few minutes talking to her parents before she moved to stand close to Draco. As she took his hand, she whispered to him, "Do you have everything you need? You sure you don't need to go back to your room and get anything else?"

Draco looked at her and nodded. "Got everything before I met you today. I shrank it all and sent it along with my owl to the school. It's waiting for me on top of the north tower. I made it look like a small piece of wood."

Daphne smiled approvingly. Draco was by no means dumb. He knew enough to cover his tracks and to hide whatever he needed in a way

that would not be picked up. For an eleven year-old, Draco was a serious young man...and he was perfect for her because they could and did trust each other implicitly. Among the 'dark' families, that was unheard of...and something worth protecting.

With a last kiss to each of her parents and her sisters, Daphne and Draco held hands and disappeared in a flash of blue and white light.

Kildonan Lodge Hotel – Hogsmeade – August 12th – 4:25 Pm.

The day-manager at the Kildonan Lodge Hotel thought he had seen it all. After all, he had worked at the hotel's Edinburgh location for over twenty years and during that time, had taken care of every kind of guest and every kind of need under the sun.

James Augustus Smythe was the great-grandson of the Hotel's founder and was a squib living his life among Muggles. While there were many things that he had come to love about living in Edinburgh, he had always felt the tug of the magical world on his soul though and had promised himself that if the possibility ever arose, that he would try to bring the hotel's special magic to one of the three magical towns in the United Kingdom.

It was a stroke of great good fortune that the necessary size piece of land became available in 1990 – allowing James and his family to build a very special lodge-hotel just at the outskirts of Hogsmeade Village.

August 12th began as any other day. The Daily Prophet had to be delivered early to each guests' room; room-service trays had to be collected from the hallways; and special orders / needs had to be fulfilled. Details could not be missed! Even one crumb on a carpet was one crumb too many, his father had always said and James thought that he was right. Guests remembered things like that. They also remembered whether the hotel was worth the price or not. The Smythe tradition was "Excellence reasonably priced".

It was for that reason that Draco and Daphne walked through the front doors and up to the registration counter. Both wore glamours which made them look like they were in their early twenties – and no squib would ever be able to see through them.

“May I help you?” he said, as he looked at Draco and Daphne. They were holding hands and smiling broadly. It was their honeymoon, such as they could be able to have, and they intended to make the most of the next four days.

Draco looked at James and said, “Yes, you can. I’m Draco and this is my wife, Daphne. We’re here for the next four days on a mini-holiday, and we’d love one of your suites.”

Daphne had given him an anonymized Gringotts credit card to use for the room charges and Draco quietly slid it across the counter to the man. “Thank you. I will go ahead and see what we have available. It shouldn’t be a problem to get you two into a nice room. It’s a bit quieter right now.”

Looking through his computerized records (something that made Daphne raise an eyebrow, given the notorious difficulties that were usually encountered when trying to mix muggle technology with magic), James Smythe dithered for a moment before settling on a decision. He had found that while the Queen’s suite was available, the two people standing in front of him didn’t seem to want it, and it wouldn’t pay to have it taken up if the Minister for Magic should happen to come to town.

“Sir? I have a very, very nice suite available on the top floor. It has a marvelous view of the lower valley and has a private deck, complete with hot tub, massage table, and wine bar.”

Not bothering to ask about the price – because he knew that between his private funds and those that Daphne’s father had made available to her for their use, Draco said, “I’m sure it will be fine. Thank you. Could you show us the way?”

James smiled broadly. It was always nice when a guest was pleased. “Certainly! Can I just get your signature on file for your room keys? Once that’s done, I’ll show you up to the room myself.”

Daphne was excited. She and Draco were going to be alone together, without parental supervision, for the first time in their lives. More, they were going to get to share a bed and spend time exploring each other. While neither was even close to being ready to being fully intimate, they were both excited about getting beyond hugging. Things between them had progressed significantly (physically) since the start of the spring and both were anxious to initiate the second phase of their marital bond. Emotionally, they were both nervous, but happy. There were so many things to talk about and share now that they were bonded. Secrets that they couldn’t share previously and confidences that they had long to be able to confide in the other – it would all happen, now that they were a bonded couple.

Draco signed the card that he was presented and then, good to his word, James Smythe led them to a magical lift that gently, but swiftly, moved them to the fourth level.

Once there, the décor changed. Gone were the golds and greens of the main foyer. They gave way to deeper reds and golds, intertwined with dark greens and, where appropriate, dark blues.

At suite no. 16, Smythe stopped and took out a plastic key-card. Turning it so that it picked up the sunlight coming from the windows at the end of the hallway, he showed Draco the small Gringotts logo on the card. “We had to pay a fortune for the Gringotts ward-builders to come up with this, but it works incredibly well. We build a new ward-glyph for each new set of cards. Those ward-glyphs are burned into the cards using very special, magical inks. All you have to do is press the card against the door momentarily and it will open. No handle; no lock...just an impassable wall if you don’t have the proper key. Once you’re inside the room, it is nigh unto a fortress. We take our clients’ security seriously. But – no reason for gloom! Here, let me show you.”

With that, he touched the door with the flat of the card for a moment and it opened magically. Inside was a room to make all other rooms jealous.

The bed, in the master suite, was a king-sized (plus) sleigh-bed. The gold duvet shimmered as Daphne and Draco approached it and suddenly became a dark, forest-green duvet with silver trim. Daphne smiled inwardly at the change, but then frowned slightly as she wondered just how much the change signaled to the man showing them around. Draco caught her look of concern and moved to cut the tour short and escort the man out of the room as quickly as was diplomatically possible.

Just as the man was starting to tell him about the wine-keeper on the secluded porch, Draco looked at him and smiled. "I think that my wife and I can handle it. I saw that there's a way to get in touch if we need anything and I'm sure we'll not hesitate to call if that's the case. All we need to know is whether we can get a reservation for a good table at dinner tonight."

"What time?"

"Seven fifteen, if possible. We've had a long day and want to retire early."

"Seven fifteen it is, then. Is there anything else?" James knew he was being sent out – and really didn't mind it; though he was a bit curious about the real identity of his two guests and was motivated to find out, if he could.

Draco looked at Daphne and then back at the Inn-Keeper. "No, I don't think so. I think we'll be fine. If you could have some tea sent up in a half-hour that would be great."

"Will do", Smythe said as he turned to leave. "Here are your cards, before I forget." Handing Draco the two cards, he made a polite half-bow and saw himself out.

The moment the door closed and the familiar squelching sound of a 'Colloportus' spell hit her, Daphne flung herself at her new husband and wrapped her arms around him tightly. It was the first time that they had been able to touch each other without someone – often

Daphne's mother – trying to curtail their almost insatiable desire for constant physical contact.

“I love you, Daphne” Draco said into her mind. “I want to spend the rest of my life learning all there is to know about you and being the best husband I can be for you.”

It might very well have sound corny or ridiculous to someone else's ears, but to her, it sounded perfectly wonderful. She knew – she could feel – that Draco was telling the absolute truth. He really, honestly, wanted to be the very best husband possible for her...even if he was not sure exactly what that meant yet.

“I love you too, Draco. You are my everything and I'm never, ever going to let you go. Your father can go fuck himself. I'm not taking the dark mark if Riddle rises again and neither are you. I don't want to see you become what your father has become and I'll kill myself before I'd ever let myself go like your mother has.”

“Let's go lie down. I'm tired of being dressed and I really, really could use that nap. Once the tea comes, we'll take an hours' kip and then eventually get up and get ready for dinner.”

He held her in his arms; while their lips met again and again; each seeking to reassure the other through touch that the thing that they had begun on the hill overlooking his ancestral home would never, ever end.

Outside the gates – Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry –
Late afternoon on August 16th

The sun was beginning to wane in the west, so that the lower slopes of the leeward side of the mountains were starting to darken with shadow. Draco and Daphne Greengrass – Draco had decided to take Daphne's last name for social purposes – stood, facing each other, in front of the gates. “One last moment of privacy before our lives become a lot more complicated, Draco.”

"I know, love. These last four days have been amazing. I made the right choice when I asked you to be my bond-mate."

"What will Dumbledore say?"

"I don't know, love. I told you...he's no fan of my father and so I think he'll help us as much as he can. I'm not expecting a fan-club...but if they agree to support us, I'll take that as a great sign."

"Ready, then?"

Squeezing her hand in his, Draco Greengrass née Malfoy placed his free hand, palm face down, on the central locking mechanism of the wrought-iron gates. Like many other large manors, the engraved plate at the center of the gate served as a magical 'knocker' – hopefully signaling those inside that there is someone at the gate wishing entrance.

A minute later, Daphne saw a tall, white-bearded man walking slowly down the main path from the front doors to the locked gate enclosing the perimeter at the base of the hill. "He's here, Draco."

"I know. I just felt his presence. Even from here. Merlin, that's power."

A half-minute later, Albus Dumbledore raised a hand and the gates opened; allowing the young couple to pass onto the school grounds. Fifty steps brought them face to face with the legendary headmaster, who looked at them quizzically. "May I presume, Draco Malfoy?"

"Yes, and no, Headmaster. I am now Draco Greengrass and this is my bond-mate, Daphne Greengrass."

"A pleasure to meet you both. I must say, this is quite out of the ordinary and unexpected. How is it that your father permitted his only son to be bonded at so early an age?"

"It's a long story, Headmaster, and I am quite sure it's one that I will not be repeating out here, in the open."

Draco was not the person Albus Dumbledore had expected. Not by a long-shot. The platinum-haired, blue-eyed boy was handsome, in a rakish kind of way – perhaps especially so since he was on the very tall side for a boy so young, while the girl was already as pretty as an eleven year-old could be. Her hair was dark-brown and her eyes were periwinkle blue – which set beautifully against her perfect, golden-hued skin.

“Let us walk then, to my office. I’m sure that your story is worth interrupting my afternoon’s schedule to hear.”

Draco and Daphne fell into step behind him as he turned and walked back towards the castle-proper. “He doesn’t quite know what to make of us, Draco. He was looking you up and down and trying to figure out how old you are and probably whether you’re taking extra growth potions to get so tall.”

“I know. I could feel his eyes on me, even as he looked you over, too. I’m betting he’s never seen your parents before and doesn’t know what to think about your heritage.”

“I know. Ewwwwwwwww. I don’t like being looked over liked that by someone that old. It’s just...creepy.”

“Ya. Like when one of my mothers’ friends started eyeing me in the spring when I was heading over to see you and was dressed in a t-shirt and shorts. Thought she was going to make me do something to her that was...personal.”

“Gross, Draco. I really didn’t need that image...and no thanks for sharing. I didn’t need to see the old bag, along with the re-telling. She was most definitely vile.” The young blonde threw his head back and laughed at her reaction; causing the Headmaster to stutter-step for a moment as he reacted to Draco’s outburst before he resumed his stately pace.

Once they were in the Great Hall, the Headmaster pointed to the stairs which went off to the right. “Up the stairs, please, both of you. My office is at the end of the hall. The two stone gargoyles protect the entrance. The password today is ‘snickers’. Please wait for me in the

outer office. I will join you momentarily. I have to get a couple of people to join us.”

Shrugging, Draco led Daphne up the wide, gorgeous stairs. They were done in Arihant River Green marble – from Udaipur region of Rajasthan, India. It was the same stone that his mother had ordered for the foyer of Malfoy Manor. The wide treads gave Draco the feeling that the castle might have been ‘done over’ sometime in the early twentieth century. The walls were tall, done in a soft, bone-white color - which was made to look somewhat dingy because of how dusty it was in places – and everywhere they looked, the walls were covered in paintings.

The paintings’ occupants, at least most of them, were moving...watching them as they went by. Those were something that a person thought nothing of in the magical world. Every well-to-do family had at least one or two magical portraits. The really wealthy families – like the Malfoy’s – had hundreds of them all over the home.

Once they got to the Headmaster’s office, they faced the gargoyles. “Snickers”, Draco said, absentmindedly. The gargoyles sprang aside; allowing Daphne and Draco to get onto the circular staircase. Never having been into Muggle-London, Draco and Daphne were both taken aback by the ‘escalator’ effect of the moving stairs.

“That was weird”, Daphne said to her love.

“Ya...only the Headmaster would do something like that. My father talked about how much Dumbledore likes Muggle stuff and Muggle technology. I bet the stairs are like something he saw in the Muggle world.”

“Scared?”

“Nah. Dumbledore has never hurt a student – even when it was clear that the student deserved the worst kind of punishment. He just wants to figure us out. Tell him as little as possible. The less he knows, the longer we can keep our relationship from being known by my father.”

In the first-floor sitting room, Malfoy Manor, at the edge of the Forest of Lockfoot; just before sunset - August 16th

Dobby the house-elf was not having a good day. First, the Mistress of the house had woken early, contrary to her explicit wishes, because he had forgotten to silence the chimes on the grandfather clock at the end of the second-floor hallway that led to the master-suite. Dobby had been forced to iron his hands twice for that.

Later in the morning, the bacon had started to burn and he had been forced to banish the entire batch out to the watch-dogs and start over; delaying breakfast by almost ten minutes. Dobby had been made to staple both of his ears closed with large nails and the blood from that was still drying.

Finally, when the Master had gone looking for his son, he had discovered that the young man was nowhere to be found and that his trunk and all of the young man's belongings were gone. Dobby was made to look for the young man and had been unable to find him thus far.

Master Malfoy was neither lenient nor understanding. He had a cruelty about him that was as much a part of him as was his inherent arrogance. Raising his wand, the wizard looked at the simpering, fearful house-elf who was cowering on the floor in front of him. "What do you mean you can't find him? Where could he be that you could not locate him?" Lucius' voice was part-menace, part "I'm-afraid-that-if-I-don't-get-this-fixed-I'm-in-trouble". Any wizard would have scoffed at it, but Dobby was not a wizard and not in a position to do anything at all about it except be frightened by it.

"I is not knowing, Master. He is hiding somewhere that must have powerful wards, Master. I is trying. All house-elves have been told that young master is missing. I is not resting until he is found!" Dobby knelt in front of the wizard; hoping that his subservience would keep the evil man from killing him.

Lucius Malfoy's first instinct was to lash out at the creature abasing itself in front of him. He knew that if Draco got away, and if there was

someone helping Draco run, that that person could learn many of his most closely guarded secrets - which could, in turn, lead to even greater problems. However, his anger was tempered by the fact that he needed the terrified elf and that there were places that the elf could go that he could not.

“Go! If you return here without my son, I will kill you.”

Dobby bowed his head all the way to the floor and then, gratefully, pop’ped! away.

Just before sunset – office of the Headmaster - Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry – August 16th

The man calling himself Albus Dumbledore walked slowly towards his office. To his left side were Harry and Hermione Potter – a magically bonded couple and the youngest soul-bonded pair ever recorded. “Remember, Harry, Hermione. I need the couple you’re about to meet to be at ease. They may be very important to you and to us and it could be bad for all of us if they decided to attend school elsewhere.”

“What’s he playing at?”

“Don’t know. Probably doesn’t hurt to go along with him for right now. Never know – we could get ourselves some allies while earning ourselves a credit with the Headmaster that we can spend later.”

“Ok. Hermione and I can do that, sir. Is there anything else we should know?”

“All I can tell you is that their names are Draco and Daphne Greengrass. They, like you two, are a bonded couple. How they accomplished that at such a young age is still a mystery to me. I’m hoping that your initial openness and offer of friendship might be enough for me to get the information I need.”

“Ah. So that’s what he’s looking for. He doesn’t know how this couple got here or how they were bonded. He must know more than he’s

telling about the two we're about to meet. Any bets that he doesn't expect us to like them?"

"No bet. That's almost a certainty. Let's just play this cool. Johan's taught me not to jump to conclusions and that things are almost never how they seem."

Hand in hand, Hermione and Harry followed their Headmaster past the gargoyles and into the odd, spiraling lift. The lift was disconcerting because the moment that a person stepped onto the first tread, expecting to walk up the stairs, it began to move upwards like a corkscrew. The Headmaster seemed totally unfazed by it.

"Love? I think that you should do the talking for us. I'm.....I'm not very good at first encounters." Harry laughed at that and Hermione felt her blush rise.

"Not very good, eh? What about our 'first encounter'? Seems that went pretty well" If, in fact, Harry's earlier comment had not fully elicited a blush from his bond-mate, then reminding her of their first meeting did. She felt her nipples grow hard and a wetness beginning to invade her core as she thought about the incredible rush of love that she had felt for him even from the very beginning. Being a girl, and therefore somewhat more sensitive to strongly emotional moments, Hermione Potter let the memory of Harry's vows to her, given on the morning of August third, suffuse her.

Harry could feel what was happening with his bond-mate, and instead of interrupting or trying to pull her out of it, he let himself be taken in by it. Hers was such an amazing memory and so full of joy in their newfound love, that Harry was unwilling to try to dampen her emotions or pull her out of the moment. He felt that she deserved all the happiness that she could get, given how lonely she had been in school and how quiet her summers always were, without friends around to play with.

Finally, Hermione came out of her reverie and pushed herself close to Harry. "I love you, Harry."

"I know, Hermione. I can feel it. I love you, too." And he did. It wasn't just that he was mirroring her feelings for him, but rather, feeling ever bit of the protectiveness and desire for her that the most powerfully bonded couples felt. He knew, without a doubt, that he'd die for her if it were ever necessary...and yet, he knew, too, that he would always be the very best he could be for her and would do everything he could to make sure they lived long, happy lives together.

"Excuse me."

The soft voice, which was not Hermione's, caught him up short. Harry found, to his embarrassment, that he had been standing, holding Hermione against him, with his face buried in the nape of her neck, with her hair cascading in silky ringlets against his cheek.

Turning to face the Headmaster, and blushing furiously, Harry said to Hermione, "Help! I don't know what to say!"

Saving Harry from further embarrassment, Hermione looked up at the Headmaster and said, "I'm sorry, Headmaster. Harry and I were....talking. I apologize for him and for me. We were carried away."

There had to be a place where the Headmaster bought lots and lots of fresh, magical batteries, Hermione thought, because the twinkle in his eye was on full-bore. What she didn't know was that the Headmaster was attempting to read her thoughts as he made eye contact with her – nothing too deeply held, of course – but he wanted to know what her surface thoughts were. This time, though, he realized that he was running into a blank wall. It was as if she wasn't there at all. No bounce-back; no mental shields....nothing. For all intents and purposes, Hermione Potter was as perfectly shielded mentally as any creature could be. It scared the life out of the Headmaster.

Swallowing hard, and grateful that his reaction couldn't be seen because of the beard he had, Albus Dumbledore realized that he might very well have bitten off more than he could chew. Deciding to test whether Hermione was a singular exception, he turned his attention to Harry. "Harry, are you all right?" His tone was affectionate

and gentle – and not falsely so, because he did feel an affection of sorts for the young boy, because of who his parents had been. The moment that the boy met his eyes, Dumbledore tried to ‘read’ him.....and ran straight into the same, infuriating wall. Only...Harry’s defense felt more like a black nothingness, rather than a wall. Looking down, after breaking the connection, the Headmaster saw that the two were holding hands. “Does their pair-bond power some kind of natural defense?” he wondered to himself. Making a point to try to scan them when they were separated, he pushed on to the point of the meeting.

“Harry, Hermione...I want you two to meet Draco and Daphne Greengrass.” Turning on his heel, the man looked at the other couple. “Draco, Daphne, I’d like you two to meet Harry and Hermione Potter.”

Draco couldn’t help himself. He was suddenly face-to-face with ‘the-boy-who-lived’. The infant who took down Voldemort. His eyes flicked up and saw the infamous scar on the boy’s forehead.

Draco was careful with his tone of voice. He remembered what his father had said about Harry Potter: that his parents had sacrificed themselves for Harry and that the boy probably was as powerful as any wizard alive – even if he didn’t know it yet.

Extending his hand, Draco said, “Nice to meet you, Harry.”

Daphne did the same thing; only she greeted Hermione as well. Once greetings had been exchanged, Dumbledore bade them sit. With a wave of his hand, four chintz chairs appeared in front of his desk out of nowhere. Daphne gasped audibly. “Draco! The Headmaster just did that wandlessly. NO ONE does wandless conjuration. Not even the dork lord could do that.”

“Well, you and I just saw it. I wonder if Potter knows what he just saw.”

Harry did know what he had just seen. It was one of the things that Johan was trying to teach him and Hermione besides potions. She had, to Johan’s slightly disbelieving eyes, had picked up the trick first, almost four days ago. Potter did it immediately afterwards; explaining

to him that since Hermione had done it and he knew how it felt – because he had felt her do it through their link – that he could then do it too.

Harry could remember the sound of his potions-teachers' voice when they had been successful. "You know you're not going to have anything left to learn in a year or so, if you keep this up long, don't you? And you know that might put me out of a job, right? Have you given any thought at all to what consideration you owe me?"

The entire conversation had been in jest....but with a point. Johan had pointed out to them that if they learned everything that the teachers had to offer too quickly, they'd be forced to do independent study sooner than later – but either way, it could create real problems – with both the media and with the Ministry for Magic. He reminded them that there was no harm in enjoying the learning process and taking things at a decent, scholarly pace.

Hermione had replied, very much tongue-in-cheek, that it was a matter of economics and timing. She wanted to learn everything quickly and leave Hogwarts sooner than later, so that she could begin her campaign for world domination. She promised Johan that her leadership style would be strictly based on meritocracy. Those who had read the most books would be put in positions of leadership. Those who were still working on picture-books would have to serve her base needs. It was just that simple. She also told him that reading Batman comic-books didn't count and that she forgave him and that he could serve her by making dinner at least three times a week, brushing out her dog, Sean so that her mother didn't have to do it, and bringing her a pint each of Banana Daiquiri, and Celebration Orange with Grand Marnier Minghella Ice Cream every Friday afternoon.

Johan had had no choice. He could not stand by and be blithely marginalized by a student, no matter how talented. Seizing his wand, he turned Hermione into a large, brown rabbit. After an hour, he lifted the enchantment. Once she was her original self, he assigned her two feet of parchment on the twelve best uses of rabbit and told that she had to create an original recipe using rabbit as the secret

ingredient and that it had to be done it one informed him, politely, that he should stop watching Iron Chef.

“Now Harry, Hermione, I asked you both here because Draco and Daphne just came to me today and I assume, Draco, Daphne, that given what I know about your families, you’re both seeking to be students here?”

“Yes, sir”, Daphne said. “We’d like to stay here, if it’s alright with you, until school starts. My parents have agreed to it for me and I’m hoping that you will allow Draco to stay, too. If he can’t stay, I can’t either. We have to be...touching...all the time or we don’t feel good at all.”

“Just like Harry and Hermione. I wonder whether that’s a marital bond or a soul-bond”, Dumbledore mused. He tried to scan them both, when they met his eye and ran straight into the same, infuriating walls that he had encountered with Harry and Hermione. “This is getting tiresome. How am I supposed to get my job done if I can’t figure out what they’re thinking?”

The look of consternation on the old man’s face was proof enough for Draco. He had felt a slight pressure against his mind when Dumbledore had met his eye and the look of frustration was confirmation. Again, his father had said as much: that the Headmaster used legilimency to read his opponents and that therefore he had to learn occlumency in order to counter it. The natural gift that Draco had for the skill was his only redeeming feature, according to his father.

Daphne squeezed his hand lovingly. “Don’t feel sad, Draco. I’m not sure your father loves himself, even. All he ever talks about is the dork lord and how he’s going to be in charge once ‘his master’ returns. That’s pathetic and you know it. You’re already ten times the man he is.”

Her pride in him and the love that she had always had for him threatened to upset the carefully crafted emotionless front that Draco had perfected for meetings such as this.

"You're welcome to stay here, both of you. I can't see why we'd want to turn either of you away, given your circumstances. Perhaps the four of you could dine together tonight? It might give you a chance to talk about things and compare notes on your experiences."

Daphne spoke up first. "I'd like that, Headmaster, if the Potters are willing?"

Thinking quickly, Hermione said equally smoothly, "We'd be happy to, Headmaster, and we welcome Mrs. Greengrass' invitation".

The beautiful, raven-haired girl looked at Hermione and smiled. It was not a completely genuine smile, but it was not a 'plastered-on' smile, like Hermione had seen some girls affect. "Actually, Mrs. Potter, my title is 'Lady Greengrass', as my family is among the three hundred original 'noble' families."

A single eyebrow – her left – threatened to become a permanent part of Hermione's forehead as she looked askance at the girl. "Oh. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Maybe I was misunderstood, or that you had forgotten, perhaps, that the Potters are the third-oldest family in all of wizarding Europe, and as such, my title is 'Lady Potter' or Duchess Potter, if you want to be formal."

Lord Potter – the title that people had to use with him in formal settings, according to what Johan had told them – was not a title Harry was used to hearing. He knew that because of his emancipation, and the loss of his parents, that he was allowed to use it, but since he never thought of himself that way – and probably wouldn't ever – it still struck him as odd. It was odder still, though not incorrect, to hear Hermione use the title 'Lady Potter'.

Albus Dumbledore listened to the exchange with interest. The pure-blood families' interest and fascination with 'official' titles was always odd. The Greengrasses were not absolute pure-bloods and yet, they maintained an 'apartness' from ordinary wizarding folk. It was off-putting, he thought, and more than a little unbecoming for a family that was, by tradition, so well and thoroughly educated. He was also startled a bit to hear that Hermione had discovered just what her bonding to Harry meant, as well. It could give her power and

influence – if she chose to wield it – that might otherwise have gone unnoticed or unused for many years. It bore watching. Dumbledore, Myrddin, also remembered that there was no such focus in his time and he wondered, perhaps, if it hadn't been the dark ages and the loss of so many lives that had somehow inculcated that stand-offishness.

Daphne looked at Hermione with a furrowed brow for a moment, even as she talked rapidly to Draco. "Is she right, Draco? Do I have to call her 'Lady Potter'?"

"Yes and yes, Daphne, if she insists. The Potters ARE the third-oldest family in wizarding Europe. That's why my father hates them. He's always been jealous of the money the Potters have and the standing they have in the Wizengamot. They control something like...15 or 20 votes. It's sick, really. But – look at Harry. He's sitting there and he doesn't care whether you call him Harry or just 'hey you'. Even now, I bet he's telling Hermione to shut up."

Draco was more right than the moment that Hermione opened her mouth to Hermione, Harry was all over her. "Hermione!! What are you doing? That's no way to make friends!"

"But Harry! The little bitch thinks she's better than we are. All because her daddy has money and they're 'pure-bloods'. I saw that shit in primary school. I'm not putting up with it here!"

"You don't have to, Hermione. We're rich. Loaded...like as in I have more money than God himself...and it's all yours."

"What!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! WHAT DO YOU MEAN WE'RE RICH?"

"Just that, Hermione. I have a vault filled with just over one-hundred forty-nine million galleons. It's like...one billion, eight hundred million quid. My family is in business; too...we've just been at it longer than the others."

Hermione wasn't paying any further attention to him. Her brain had shut off at the words 'one billion' and 'quid'. Those weren't numbers she could comprehend. Ever.

Harry looked at Daphne and picked up where Hermione had left off. "Lady Greengrass, please forgive me. Hermione is protective and our relationship is still so new that I think she's going to be doing that for a while."

Daphne eyed him, as did the Headmaster. He was offering her a way out of sorts by deflecting blame towards himself and apologizing for his wife at the same time. Draco decided to speak for Daphne. "It's all right, Pot...Harry. We're new together, too. Daphne and I are not used to introducing ourselves yet." Extending his hand, he looked at Harry. "Friends?"

Harry thought about it and then decided to take a chance, extended his own hand. "Sure, why not. It's not like I can't use to have some friends."

"Good. You know, Harry, my father is going to hate me for this..." then he thought about that for a moment. "Nah. He already hates me. He'll just want to kill me that much sooner for making friends with you."

THAT caught Harry's attention. "Why?"

Shaking his head, Draco looked at him. "I was told you lived with Muggles growing up, but don't tell me that you really know nothing of our world."

Harry grinned. "Fine, I won't tell you."

Draco covered his face with his hands for a moment and then looked at Harry. Really looked at him. "Ok Harry, it's like this. My father's a death eater. Not just a death eater, but one of the dork lord's inner-circle. My father hates you because you destroyed his master when you were only fourteen months old. He hates ME because I know all his dirty little secrets and because he can't control me. I married Daphne because she's always been my best friend and because my father forbade it. So...when he and my mother went out of town for a 'meeting', Daphne and I went up to the top of the hill overlooking the Manor and I made a devotional circle and Amelia Bones herself came and did our bonding. I can't go home now. My father will try to break

our bonding or just kill me outright and replace me with some kid he adopts from one of the lesser houses that my family controls. Either way, I'm screwed." Harry was not nearly as flabbergasted as the Headmaster. Lucius Malfoy was not exactly an unknown quantity to the Headmaster, but the level of depravity and uncaring that Draco had just described was well beyond anything that he, the Headmaster, could have come up with in his idle musings. It gave 'Albus' a number of new insights into 'pure-blood' politics and family dynamics that he had not previously enjoyed. It also gave him lots of leverage – if he used it right. Draco was a goldmine of information, if he could be convinced to part with it at a price that the Headmaster was willing to pay. Maybe Draco would like to play Quidditch a year early...would that be enough? A new broom, maybe? He thought to himself. Boys are always so easy to manipulate. Appeal to their base drives and you own them...for a while. Then he thought of Harry and where he had gone so wrong with the boy. At least the Dursleys are out of the way and I didn't have to deal with them. Probably should have dealt with them early on, after Figg told me what they were like. Oh well. The only question now is where Harry stays next summer. Going to have to work out that one; provided that Johan doesn't provide a solution first. Resourceful, that one. Hermione watched as Harry slowly gathered information from the blonde-haired boy and, at the same time, diffused the situation that she had almost caused. It was very, very well done. She realized that Harry had at least some talent for dealing with people.

Harry thought to her, in a brief pause in his conversation with Draco, "He's surprised by the effect of the bonding. That's surprising, given that he's 'pure-blood'. You'd think that he'd have a 'superior' education to us commoners."

"Remember what Johan said. People are never, ever what they seem at first."

"Got that right, love. You're doing well with Draco."

"He's scared, just like I was before Johan saved me. Draco wants someone to protect him and he's not completely convinced that the Greengrasses can do it or he'd never have come here."

Draco watched Harry and Hermione communicate and was fascinated by it. Their eyes had gone unfocused and it was clear that they were 'elsewhere' – and since they were bonded, he knew that they had to be talking to each other in the same way that he and Daphne had discovered they could do. Thinking that he should test Harry's vulnerability, he sent a low-level stinging hex at him with the wand he had appropriated from his fathers' collection. It was an untraceable wand – a Gregorovich – and it was particularly good for 'darker' magics.

What happened next was unexpected. The hex bounced off a golden shield that seemed to come out of nowhere and at the same time, brought Harry and Hermione out of their reverie.

"What was that?" Harry snapped.

Contrite, Draco said, "I'm sorry, Harry. I wanted to see whether you could defend yourself while you and Hermione were talking."

"And? What happened?"

"You two are weird, Harry. A golden shield came out of nowhere and my hex came back at me."

"Ok, that's enough, you two. I'll leave the four of you to your own devices this afternoon and expect to see you all at dinner tonight. There will be a separate table in the Great Hall for you and dinner will be served at seven."

Hermione, Daphne, Draco, and Harry all turned to look at the Headmaster. They had, collectively, almost entirely forgotten that he was still seated at his desk, watching them. "Harry, Hermione, you both still have work due to me, Headmistress McGonagall, and to Professor Snape and we expect to see it completed by morning. You will be sitting your end-of-year exams on August 31st, if all goes well, and I don't want to see you put in anything but your best efforts."

It was Draco who looked at them first; though Daphne's mouth gapped open as well. "What do you mean, Headmaster? How could

they have work due? And how is it that they are sitting end-of-year exams at the end of the month?"

"Hermione and Harry both showed exceptional abilities from the moment that they were told about the wizarding world, Draco, and they both expressed a willingness to forgo the traditional summer holidays in order to take close to a full year's course-load over the summer. They will both be taking some first year classes this fall, as certain professors were not willing to return to teach them, but for the most part, they will be in second – and in two cases, third-year classes."

Hermione sat back in satisfaction as she watched the two 'new kids' process what they had just been told. Not only had what the Headmaster just said reinforced the idea that 'pure-bloods' are not superior to those Muggle-born academically, but he had also conveyed the idea that Harry and Hermione were willing to work hard to get where they wanted to be.

"Hermione, Harry - you are dismissed. Draco, Daphne, please stay for a moment and we'll talk about accommodations for these last two weeks."

Rising to leave, Hermione took Harry's hand and allowed herself to be pulled in close to him as they made their way back down the spiraling staircase and out between the stone gargoyles.

"Well, that was interesting. I didn't expect to meet the son of my worst enemy and yet like him."

"He didn't seem so bad, Harry. I get the feeling that he's not anything like his father and doesn't want to be. It's hard to be willing to imitate your own father when you know he'd just as soon kill you and replace you with a 'better' model."

"Know what you mean, love. That freaked me out, too. Here I was thinking my relatives were bad!" The fact that Harry could laugh about what had happened to him at his relatives' home was a good sign, Hermione thought.

The two made their way back to their private suite; where they settled in for the remainder of the afternoon and worked on the yards and yards of assignments that had accumulated for them in the last several days. More than likely, they'd both be up until at least midnight or later, working. Dinner would be a welcome break.

In the Sanctum Sanctorum – 4:55 Pm - August 16th

Every year presented challenges to the one calling himself 'Albus Dumbledore'. Some years were worse than others. This one was most assuredly not shaping up well.

As he sat in his favorite easy chair – the one he had bought surreptitiously from Marks and Spencer after a particularly grueling battle in the Wizengamot over greater autonomy for the school. It was an Ashbourne Manual Recliner; done in his favorite red and black tartan, the one favored by Clan McGonagall, and it was the most comfortable chair he had ever owned or created. It looked a bit strange and out of place with the tartan fabric, but he loved it.

Puffing on his pipe, with a half-used bag of McClelland Personal Reserve: British Woods tobacco on the table, he thought what he was facing. Not only did he have two bonded couples on his hands already that he had not counted on, but both of them were couples he could not read at all. Plus, he was confounded by the power that Harry and Hermione had already shown. Seeing the Nimbus Lumens Amor around Harry and Hermione had been a huge shock and he wondered, silently, whether it was worth telling them about what he suspected or if he should keep it under wraps for a while. His thoughts were focused on one Hermione Jane Potter. "Mrs. Potter is too damn smart for her own good. If I don't tell them, and she discovers it on her own, they'll blame me for not telling them and I could lose what trust they have in me...If I DO tell them, though, they might get careless and go off half-cocked and get themselves killed, because they think they're invulnerable somehow. Damned if I do and damned if I don't. Hell of a way to live, really."

Knowing that he was going to be forced to make a serious choice, one that might have long-lasting, possibly world-changing consequences, was an uncomfortable position to be in for the man. He hoped that Minerva would understand – no matter which way it came out – because she was going to be key to their understanding how different they were from the rest of the world.

The afternoon's meeting had been odd, to be sure. First Draco and his new bride, a girl from a definitively 'grey' family, had appeared at the gates of the school, requesting entrance and, essentially, refuge. Then Harry and Hermione had surprised him by not only finding common ground with Draco and Daphne, but befriending them. It was useful, he supposed, that it had happened – because it had exposed Harry and Hermione's unique gift and protection – but it also presented some problems. A rivalry between the two probably would have caused the two to try harder and achieve more than either could have done on his own. What he had not counted on was the presence of such smart, hard-working, bond-mates. They completely changed the calculus about what each boy needed to achieve his own, greatest potential...and might totally fuck up the plan for taking down Tom Riddle permanently. He knew – or at least thought he knew that things had to happen in a certain way or the world would be plunged into eternal darkness. It was not something that made sleep come easy.

Just as he was about to drift off to sleep for a short kip, an odd-looking elf appeared at his side. He was horrifying to look at. His ears were nailed in several places and his hands were badly bandaged and the sheet that the elf was wearing was ratty and disgusting.

There was something about the elf, though, that struck a chord of recognition with the old man. Something about the way the elf's eyes flicked all about the room and it kept wringing its hands stirred a memory. Then it came to him. This was Lucius Malfoy's elf. Once the Headmaster realized that, he sat up straight and his wand was suddenly in his hand. Stupefy, he thought. The elf never had a chance. Even before he could get out a single word, the stunner – hundreds of times more powerful than one from an ordinary witch or wizard – took the elf straight in the chest and he fell, face-first onto the carpeted floor.

Scooping up elf, he called into the air, "Minx!" In an instant, a well-dressed, uniformed elf appeared. "Yes, Headmaster. May I help you?"

"Yes Minx, you can. This elf belongs to Lucius Malfoy and has probably come looking for Malfoy's son, Draco. We can't let this elf find him – at least not yet. I need you to take this one down to the basement; clean him up, heal him, and then put him into the blue crystal cage. Make sure that he has a soft bed and enough food. Once you've seen to those things, wake him up. His name, I think, is Dobby. I want to see if it's possible that Draco can free Dobby from service with House Malfoy. No creature ever deserves to be treated this way."

Looking pleased with what she had just been asked to do, Minx, the head elf at Hogwarts, took the unconscious Dobby and disappeared. "Well, that was interesting. Dobby didn't say a word. He just stood there. I wonder if he was working up the courage to talk to me or if he was under some kind of compulsion. Going to have to ask Rubeus about that. If anyone would know, it would be him."

Getting up, because the need or desire to kip had somehow fled for the moment, 'Albus' walked over to where he had set down his pipe and picking up it and his remaining supply of tobacco, left his inner sanctum for the even greater security of his private suite. There were still things to do and he needed some time in front of his pensieve in order to sort out everything that had happened during the day.

August Thirty-first, 8:00 Am, in the Great hall.

There was more chatter in the Great Hall than there had been since the last day of classes on June 21st. The head table had been abandoned in favor of the central long table in the hall, because it had been decided that while there were no students in the building, save for the four that were there under extraordinary circumstances, it was a great deal more friendly to be able to look at least some of your colleagues in the eye over meals. For some, it brought back great

memories of simpler times in their lives. For others, it was just more relaxing than being up on some dais, set apart.

Dobby, the house-elf, was attending to Draco and Daphne's needs. Once Draco had heard that Dobby was caged in the bowels of the school, he had asked the Headmaster at once for permission to visit him. Just as 'Albus' had hoped, Draco asked Dobby if it was possible, given the magic that bound Dobby to House Malfoy, for him to free Dobby. Dobby had replied that all it required was a single item of clothing from a member of the household and the magic words, 'I release you'.

Draco had taken his own shirt off and given it to Dobby and unhesitating, said 'I release you, Dobby'. From that moment on, Dobby was Draco's personal butler/cook/protector. There weren't any protestations about it by the staff – even if it seemed odd at times. From the outset, it was an interesting relationship. Draco had so few needs and fewer wants that he was unsure if he was ever asking enough of the little elf. To top it off, Daphne had insisted on paying Dobby a wage...which immediately put her into Hermione's permanent 'good books'. Counter to every example anyone had ever seen, Dobby had just as happily accepted them. He bragged to all the other elves that he was the 'highest paid elf in all the world' thanks to Daphne. The shirt that Draco had given him had instantly become Dobby's most prized possession – because it signified the beginning of his freedom – and it was hung, with care, in Dobby's private room.

Several days later, Hermione had gone off that same day and knitted; using yarn she had received from Professor McGonagall for the express purpose, a scarf and a pair of socks for the elf. They were done, appropriately enough, in the same red-and-black tartan that the Headmistress seemed to favor.

Hermione had decided to wait to give them to Dobby until this particular morning because she thought that doing it once the rest of the students had returned to school would have caused a great deal more chatter and attention than was necessary.

It had begun simply enough. Once Dobby had finished serving Draco and Daphne, she had asked them permission to speak with Dobby

directly. Seeing no reason to say no, they gave her permission to approach the elf and talk to him. Hermione walked around the end of the table and over to where Draco and Daphne were seated and looked at the small elf. She asked him to please close his eyes for a moment and extend his hands in front of him, palms-up. He did so and she summoned the two gifts to her, wandlessly (earning her extra kudos from Professors Snape, McGonagall, Dumbledore, and Flitwick), and placed them in his hands.

They were not wrapped, but they did have a silk ribbon around them which Hermione had done into a very fancy bow. Slowly and carefully, the little elf undid the bow and then tried on the scarf and socks. He was so happy that, for the first time since she had met the elf, he was speechless. To show his thanks, Dobby almost knocked Hermione over with his knee-level hug. Feeling awkward about that, she knelt down and gave him a proper hug - something that was far easier and more comfortable to do, since she was eye to eye with him that way, and told whispered in his now healed ear that she would never, ever let anyone hurt him again.

Dobby's ping-pong-ball-like eyes started to fill with tears and he started to tremble all over. At first, Hermione thought she had hurt his feelings, but then he hugged her again and disappeared.

A moment later, he reappeared and looked up at the young, beautiful girl. "Dobby knows you like books, Lady Potter. Bad, bad man doesn't need library anymore. Dobby bring library to her." Dobby held out his hand and gave her a box that fit in his palm.

"That's true, Dobby. Bad men don't need libraries. Is that what this is? What do I do with it?" Hermione was confused about what she was being given. More, the exchange had captured the attention of everyone at the table and they were all watching to see what the elf said next. More than a few of them realized that Hermione Potter was, perhaps, about to be given access to perhaps the greatest private collection of magical tomes outside of Hogwarts itself. Albus Dumbledore was keenly aware that Hermione Potter might be getting an infusion of knowledge the likes of which no other witch had ever gotten before.

“Dobby went to bad man’s home and took library, shrunk it, and brought it here. Dobby can be putting it in your trunk if you wants doing it.”

Harry didn’t want to yell across the room to her, so he thought to her, “Oh my God, Hermione. Draco just said to tell Dobby YES!! Tell him YES!!”

“Ok, ok. I’ll do it! Jeesh...calm down! Both of you.”

“Dobby, Yes. My answer is yes. Please. I want you to know that you’ve just given me something that is too marvelous for words. Thank you!”

Hermione bent over and kissed the bouncing elf between the ears. “Misses is caring about Dobby! Dobby doesn’t deserve such care!”

“Yes, you do, Dobby. All people deserve care....well...maybe not bad, bad man.”

In a wink, the elf was gone again. Draco was almost beside himself. He had left the place where he and Daphne had been sitting for breakfast and sat down hard, next to Harry and Hermione. There was amusement in his eyes. “You know what you’ve just done, right?”

Hermione shook her head. Draco grinned and said, “That library....has the largest collection of dark magic tomes in the world and all of the counter-curses that the Aurors have never discovered. You’re going to know more about dark magic – and how to counter it - than anyone at the DMLE.”

That got those around him talking quickly and they didn’t hear what Draco said next. “Hermione, my father had the largest collection of books in all of Great Britain or Ireland. He used to brag about it all the time, to anyone who’d listen. Potion books, books on rituals, books on soul-magics, you name it. He had a special potions-book all about making types of Amortentia. The whole collection’s like...fifty thousand books or something.” Draco started laughing to himself, as if he was the only one in on a private joke. “Oh my God, is he going to be pissed!!”

Not quite believing what she was hearing, she looked at him. "You're all right with this?"

Draco looked at her. "Hermione, in case you've forgotten, my father hates me. More, he hates the fact that I'm going to inherit everything once he is gone. He's never liked the fact that I'm not as good a wizard as he is. I've never been as good in so many things that he thought were important. Mostly though, he hates me because I love Daphne. That was my ultimate sin. So, no, I'm not at all fussed that you got the library. If I want to borrow a book, I know you'll let me, so no skin off my nose. Besides, most of the books are so far beyond my skills anyway that I couldn't use them. All I want from my father is his departure from this life. My mother I love, but....she's always defended him first and since I'm an only child, I've always wondered where her priorities were. If she kicks it, I'll be sad, but...I have Daphne and that's all that matters to me."

He meant every word of it. Hermione could feel it. It was really one of the saddest things she had ever heard. "Think that it will come to that, Draco?" she asked, softly.

There were tears at the edges of the blonde boy's eyes and Hermione's eyes flicked downward, as to not embarrass him. "Yes, Hermione, I do. My parents are into too many dark things...being death eaters isn't the only bad one. I know some of the things my father does in Knockturn alley and they aren't pretty. Something is going to catch up to him and probably her, too. There's nothing I can do about it. I'm here and that's that, as they say."

Daphne moved over from where she had been sitting, so she could be on Draco's lap. She moved his head to her breast and hugged him tight. It wasn't erotic, but rather maternal...and it was a move that Hermione knew well.

All too soon, the quiet calm that had come over the Hall was broken by the voice of the Headmaster; speaking from the end of the table. "Harry, Hermione. It is now 8: 45 Am. You have fifteen minutes in

which to compose yourselves and prepare for today's exams. You'll want to gather quills, parchment, water-bottles, etc. and be here and ready for 9 Am sharp. Testing today will go until Noon. There will be a 90 minute break and then you will resume testing until five-thirty. There will be a sixty-minute break then and if all goes well, you will be able to finish up your last exam at seven-thirty tonight. I wish you both the best of luck and want to let you both know that I am very proud of how hard you have both worked these last twenty-five days. I know it's been completely exhausting for both of you, but you've both learned a great deal and are ready for an even greater challenge. So, off with you now. We'll see you back here in a few minutes."

Harry and Hermione both stood; shaking off the last remaining mental cobwebs, and then went to their suite to gather what they would need for their testing. It was going to be a very, very long day.

In the private kitchen of Malfoy Manor – August 31st – 9 Am.

Lucius Malfoy was raging against the world. Not only was his son gone, his house-elf was now gone. With his wife away on an overnight trip, he was hungry - very, very hungry and had called the annoying, disreputable creature to his side again and again with no results. There was only one other person who could release....

"That misbegotten shit" Lucius thought. "I should have killed the little bastard when I had the chance. Now he's gone and cost me my house-elf! Fuck him. I see him...he dies."

The rant went on like that for several long minutes. Finally, after running out of creative curses and ways to kill his only son painfully-enough to be satisfying, the blond / grey-haired man made his way towards the family library. It had always been useful before – when he needed a new way to curse someone. Opening the doors with a wave of his wand, the elder Malfoy entered the library and gasped. It was gone. All gone. Left behind were hundreds and hundreds of rows of empty wooden shelves.

The throbbing began in his chest, but then spread out to his limbs and into his head. It was like someone had started up a mining-

hammer in his head. He tried to calm down; to come up with a rational reason why his library...his precious library...was gone. He couldn't. The only explanation that he could come up with is that the same house-elf whom he had sent to look for his son had come back and taken the library.

The only thing he couldn't come up with is why? Elves didn't read....but sons did: Especially sons who might need or want to do some cursing of their own. A lump of cold fear settled into the elder Malfoy's stomach. If Draco had teamed up with a fully-qualified witch or wizard AND had access to the entire library, he, the head of the Malfoy family could be in serious trouble. Some of the curses had no counters...and some of them were so terrible that even the Dark Lord himself was afraid of using them. It didn't pay to escalate warfare beyond a certain point. Even the Americans – the most cold-blooded, efficient killers the world had ever seen – and who had killed more people in two days than there were wizards in all of the United Kingdom and Europe combined, knew that to be true.

He looked around, in hopes that something had been missed that he could use. At first, he thought that he might just have gotten lucky when he thought about his private vault and the 'special' tomes of magic that he had hidden there. No such luck. It had been cleaned out, too. Years of work in finding, buying, stealing or 'borrowing' books from around Europe gone to naught. It was enough to make a grown man cry.

But – he wasn't beaten yet. He still had his office!

Apparating straight to his private office overlooking the corner of Knockturn and Diagon Alley, Lucius Malfoy went straight to the door which led to his office library.

There were books on the floor...which appeared to have been casually tossed aside. He rushed over to where they lay and picked them up: hoping against hope that he might have gotten lucky. Turning them over, his rage and frustration grew yet again. He was holding Webster's Collegiate Dictionary; Webster's Collegiate Thesaurus; and Spell-creation for Dummies.

He needed help. There was nothing for it but to ask for help. Then he thought about who he could turn to. The DMLE? They'd laugh at him. Go to Dumbledore? Even worse. Rodolphus Lestrage or his brother? If they learned of his current weak situation, they might kill him themselves. Rabastan was particularly blood-thirsty and always had a sense for weakness in his foes. Not a good person to cross even when a person had the decidedly upper-hand, Rabastan had to be crossed off the list of people because he was just simply certifiably psychopathic.

There were twenty names on the list of people whom he might have turned to for help if his own position was better, but dared not approach, with all of his assets gone. At least he still had money at Gringotts!

Normally a conservative person and a spend-thrift, Lucius decided that if he couldn't turn to his own resources, he'd have to buy some new ones. It would take a long while, but it was worth it. The first thing he had to do was to figure out a way to keep the new books from being stolen, too.

His head was pounding from the frustration and anger...so he staggered out of the office library and back to his desk, where there was at least one vial of pain medicine. It wasn't magical....but it would have to do.

Soon, with the Muggle medicine coursing in his veins (he never did understand what the Muggle doctor had meant by 'morphine' and 'controlled substance'), Lucius Malfoy felt like a new person. It took away all the pain and all of his cares for several long, blissful hours. It was better than Firewhiskey any day!

Chapter Four – “What is Real?”

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Disclaimer: I do not own any of the Harry Potter characters. All characters are creations of Joanne K Rowling, © 2007, to whom I am deeply indebted. I make no money from any of this.

Note one – I’ve borrowed a name from: Ravenwood240’s story – “The Shades of Grey”. I want to thank him for its use. It can be found at: [fanfiction\(dot\)net/s/3110044/1/Harry_Potter_and_The_Shades_of_Grey-ravenwood240\(at\)msn\(dot\)com](http://www.fanfiction(dot)net/s/3110044/1/Harry_Potter_and_The_Shades_of_Grey-ravenwood240(at)msn(dot)com)

Note two – I’ve adopted the ‘fact’ that Pansy Parkinson’s parents are named Gruoch and Malcom Parkinson. These names come from “White Knight, Grey Queen”, by the author Jeconais. He can be found at [jeconais\(dot\)fanficauthors\(dot\)net](http://jeconais(dot)fanficauthors(dot)net)

Email - [jeconais\(at\)fanficauthors\(dot\)net](mailto:jeconais(at)fanficauthors(dot)net). Tim is an exceptional author – far better than I will ever be, and I am grateful to him for his tolerance of my use of his creative genius here.

Note three – I make reference in this story to a ship called the Wanderer. It was a real ship and did, in fact, sail out of the harbor in New Bedford, MA. (USA) for the last time in March, 1924. More information about the ship and it’s history can be found at:

[mattapoisethhistoricalsociety\(dot\)org/whalingships_](http://mattapoisethhistoricalsociety(dot)org/whalingships_)

Note four – this chapter is 41 pages long and 17,055 words in length.

From Chapter three – “Tangled Webs”:

.....Normally a conservative person and a spend-thrift, Lucius decided that if he couldn't turn to his own resources, he'd have to buy some new ones. It would take a long while, but it was worth it. The first thing he had to do was to figure out a way to keep the new books from being stolen, too.

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Married quarters, West tower, Hogwarts – 7:30 Am – Sunday, Sept. 1st

Hermione Potter was warm; snuggled as she was next to the person she loved most in the whole world. On the far side of the enormous bed, Amrita lay curled up, while Harry – the 'boy-who-lived' – lay curled around his beloved, young wife. A little boy in so many respects, Harry Potter was anything but usual. He had gone from being frightened and alone; abused and neglected, to loved, protected, and safe in a matter of one month. More, with Hermione's encouragement and her innate sense of caring and compassion, Harry had changed from timid and hesitant to a boy filled with curiosity and a willingness to prove himself worthy to the teachers who had stepped in to act in loco parentis. Gone was the scrawny, injury-plagued boy and in his place was a growing, married young wizard.

Despite their remarkable achievements during the short time they had been students, the true magic was in their bond. All the teachers had commented on it. Hand in hand, Hermione and Harry would walk into the Great Hall in order to share a meal with the teachers who had

gathered to teach them and the pair would literally glow. It was something indescribably beautiful. All who saw and felt the aura were made better for the experience and none could feel anything negative while in its presence. However, Harry and Hermione were not alone in that magic. Draco and Daphne Greengrass found their own glow and their own magic and had surprised all of them the morning that they, too, walk in hand-in-hand, softly glowing with their love for each other.

It was about them and the first time that Harry and Hermione had seen Draco and Daphne's glow that Hermione lay dreaming; safe and secure in her young husbands' arms.

Elsewhere in the millennia-old castle, Myrddin Aurelianus, the only son of the amorous union between the Roman general Ambrosius Aurelianus and a Draco-succubus whom he had captured, sat smoking his pipe and thinking about all that he was facing. Not two, but now three bonded couples were either coming to or had already arrived at Hogwarts and not one of them was a couple he could have predicted. More, it put pairings he had hoped for out of his reach.

It was one thing, he knew, to play match-maker and try to get couples together. It was a wholly different thing all together to break up a bonded couple. Myrddin was, after all, a planner. He had to be. But he was not, nor would ever be, a murderer of children. Breaking up a bonded couple was nothing short of deliberate murder and while he had taken many adult lives during his life, he had never, ever killed an innocent.

'Albus', Myrddin, thought about the floo-call he had received from Molly Weasley. In truth, his ears were still ringing because of it. They did not call her 'Hurricane Molly' for nothing, he thought. Ginevra Weasley, and her bond-mate, Luna Marie Lovegood, had to have some considerable spunk to be willing to go up against Molly.

Albus didn't need a pensieve to recall the conversation.

"Albus, you there?"

Walking over to the fireplace, 'Albus' looked down to see Molly Weasley's face. Even with the distortion caused by the magical flames, it was easy to tell that she was very, very upset. "What is it, Molly?"

"My daughter", which she said as if the word was extremely distasteful, "has gone and bonded herself to another girl. I want this broken! I will not sit by and have my daughter playing house with other girls!"

"She's not quite eleven, right?" he asked her, politely.

"Yes, and her lover is just eleven now" From her words and the strain in her voice, 'Albus' could tell that the entire subject was extremely upsetting and painful to the woman. It was too bad, he thought, that women put so much stock in trying to marry off their daughters. There were some amazing women whom he had known over the centuries who had been single or had found love in the arms of another woman. It made no difference to him at all whom his students or his friends loved.

"Well, there's nothing much I can do for you. Did they do a full bonding ceremony?"

"Yes, god-damn it. Rings and everything."

"Marital oaths?"

"Yes, stupid fucking girl. Even the rings are enchanted and can't be removed. I know, I've tried."

"Did she do anything in response?"

"She kicked me in shins. That was after her magic pushed me away."

"Stupid woman", 'Albus' thought.

"Molly, I think it's probably best if you just leave it alone." He paused for a moment. "Actually, I think your daughter and her partner ought, probably, to floo right here. How soon could they be ready?"

“What do you mean, Albus?”

“I mean Molly, with no disrespect to you or Arthur, that it’s probably for the best if your daughter and her bond-mate were out from under foot for the next year or so. There are two other bonded couples here already and I know Ginny and her bond-mate would be welcome among them.”

“You’ll take them? Even after what they’ve done?”

“Actually Molly, it’s BECAUSE of what they’ve done that I would welcome them. You remember that we talked about this earlier in the summer and about the fact that I and my staff, will be performing the lunctus Animus charm this fall on all of the first- and second-year students in hopes that they will find bond-mates.”

“YES, you son-of-a-bitch, I remember. I remember all too well. You all but promised that my Ginny would find a BOY to mate with!” Molly’s temper had turned poisonous and nasty and the Headmaster thought that perhaps, the ‘real’ Molly was finally showing through.

“Actually, Molly, I promised no such thing and I don’t appreciate your imprecation. Also, you will keep a civil tone with me or it could go badly for you.” His tone was direct and colored with a certain amount of raw power in his voice – power that was both intimidating and full of threat.

“Fuck you, Albus. You can’t intimidate me that easily. You forget whom I’m married to. Threaten me and I assure you, YOU will regret it.”

The conversation had taken a decidedly bad turn and ‘Albus’ knew he wasn’t going to win it in the short term. Molly was, he knew too, at least partially right. Arthur had been an unspeakable in his early days after leaving Hogwarts and had been very, very effective in his assignments, given how quickly he had risen through their ranks. He fiercely protected her and would not take his threats to her kindly. The Unspeakables were known for sticking together as well and it would not help his cause to have them angry with him en masse. They

tended to know a great deal of magic and have access to curses that could be difficult to counter, if not impossible. He was going to have to 'walk the cow backwards' and quickly, if he wanted to keep the encounter from escalating further.

"Molly, I will forgive you your disrespect for right now, with the understanding that you are angry over your daughters' actions. I will however, not forget it. You will find a cold reception indeed if you ever come looking for favors from this office."

She glared at him. "Piss off, Albus. You're not God and I care not a rat's ass if I have your support or not. My family is over eight hundred years old and will be here long after you've gone to dust and are forgotten."

"Perhaps, Molly, perhaps" and with that, the conversation ended.

Ten minutes later, a very pretty, young blonde girl floo'ed his office and announced that she was Luna Lovegood and asked if she and her bond-mate could please come through.

When the two young girls emerged from the fire-place, they presented themselves to him formally and asked for admittance to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. It was a necessary, albeit somewhat redundant ceremony, given that they had both received letters announcing their candidacy for matriculation to the school earlier in the summer.

He looked at them both and tried to assess both their magical and personal potentials. Luna Lovegood – the only granddaughter of a famous seer – was high in both personal and magical potential. In particular, she seemed very gifted in her ability to see multiple spectra and had at least some of her grandmother's precognitive ability. Her eyes were an unusual gray, as opposed to pale blue, and the Headmaster thought that the eyes were the telltale indicator for those talents. The ability to see multiple spectra would allow someone to see things that would otherwise be invisible. That included animals of every sort which most other wizards thought were figments of imagination. The crumple-horned snorkack was the least of them.

Ginevra “Ginny” Weasley, on the other hand, was all about power. Power the likes of which he had seen in only one other (mortal) witch in all his long existence – Hermione Potter. The fact that two witches were now present in his school, and he did think of Hogwarts as his, despite what the four founders might have thought, was extraordinary.

She was not quite as powerful as her compatriot, though, and ‘Albus’ thought that it was probably because of Hermione’s bond-mate. It was her intimate connection to Harry James Potter that allowed Hermione to do the things that she had done so far, he thought. Why that was, though, was still a mystery. Certainly, he had never shared his powers with anyone – even his wife.

So the question was: What to do with Ginny Weasley and her bond-mate. He couldn’t use Ginny, as he might have thought to do, as a potential bond-mate for Harry. That was off-limits for good. He couldn’t very well use her as a foil against Slytherin students, because the student who had been the most likely leader of the Slytherin faction was now a bonded student who was demonstrating very Hufflepuff-like tendencies and unlikely to be leading the ‘pureblood’ faction in the coming school-year.

Nor, he thought, could Ginny be tempted into a bond with another of the light-side or slightly gray ‘pureblood’ families – which might have helped him coalesce a group that could, eventually, be led by Harry in his effort to destroy Tom Riddle once and for all.

Wait and see. God, how he hated those words. He’d been ‘waiting and seeing’ for the last eleven years and no matter how often he told himself that he’d done it in the past and that patience was a virtue, he still hated it. Knowing that there was a certain irony in the fact that someone who was destined to live five thousand years hated to wait less than a score of years for a plan to come to fruition, the Headmaster laughed to himself.

Looking at the two girls in front of him, he said, “Well Ginny, Luna, I suppose that now that you’re both here, you want to know what we have in store for you. First, you know, both of you, that you’re very, very young to be here – and that, in and of itself – may cause some

problems. Older students don't generally like being 'shown up' by younger students.

Also, you're both aware that there is some tension between this office and the House of Weasley over my invitation to you."

Ginny looked up at the old man – whom she had seen only once before in her life – and said, "Don't underestimate her, sir. She's a fireball when she gets going. I know. I've seen what she's done to my brothers Fred and George when they crossed her."

Thinking of "Hurricane Molly" going after Fred and George Weasley – the best and most creative pranksters since the Marauders – finally got to the Headmaster and he gave out a great, mirthful laugh. "Yes, Ms. Weasley, I can only imagine. Your brothers do have a penchant for causing mischief and inviting the wrath of some teachers."

Ginny smiled. She couldn't help it. No one loved the twins more than she. It had been the two of them who had helped her, on more than one occasion; prank her mother and / or her mother and elder brother, Percy.

"Well, Ms. Weasley, Ms. Lovegood, I want you both to know that I am very proud of you. You've obviously made a commitment to each other that runs deeper than any 'mere' friendship and you've both demonstrated exceptional discipline and the magical control necessary to perform a bonding ceremony. I would not have believed it possible for two so young, but I see the proof before me and have to acknowledge that I don't, in fact, know everything. Of course, you'll not mention that to anyone you know, will you?"

"No, Headmaster", the two girls said together.

"Good. I'm glad to hear it! Now, there are two other couples here. The first couple consists of two Muggle-raised children. Mr. Harry Potter and his bonded wife, Mrs. Hermione Potter."

Ginny's eyes grew about four sizes at the mention of Harry's name and her excitement in hearing that she'd be attending school with the 'boy-who-lived' was nearly uncontainable. Luna, on the other hand,

smiled knowingly and simply held her lover's hand as she jumped up and down.

"Yes, yes. It is exciting, I'm sure, to be in school with someone you've heard about your whole life. Let me tell you though, Ms. Weasley, that Mr. Potter is not at all the person you expect. He is very, very quiet and shy and does not understand, not even a little bit, about why he is famous. Nor does he care about being famous. For him, it is a burden and nothing more. He doesn't remember the act for which he is famous and I think, if you ask him about it, he will not react well. Do you understand?"

She didn't understand, at least not completely, but she was willing to respect the Headmaster's request...for now. "I think so, Headmaster. I'll do my best not to say anything."

"Good. He will take to you both much better if you treat him no differently than any young man you might meet."

Taking out his favorite scrimshaw-style pipe, the Headmaster took a moment to collect his thoughts while packing the pipe's bowl with some particularly aromatic 'Christmas' tobacco. It was his favorite pipe – because it had been gifted to him by the last captain of The Wanderer, which last sailed out of New Bedford harbor in March, 1924, only to be lost on the shoals near Martha's Vineyard. The animal which had given up its life for him had been a very lost, but highly magical Narwhal. The pipe had been lovingly carved by an artist on Martha's Vineyard and depicted a scene of titanic struggle between man and beast.

Cupping the pipe in one hand, he lit it with a bit of magical flame before turning his attention back to the two girls standing in front of him. They were still holding hands and he saw by their body-language that they were both seeking more physical contact, without being too overt about it.

Deciding that it was better to just come out and ask the question, he said to them, "Are you both feeling compelled still to have constant contact with each other?"

Luna looked at him and some of the smile fell away, as she thought about how she should answer the question. “We are”, she said hesitantly.

“Then you’re both in good company, Ms. Lovegood. Mr. and Mrs. Potter are never out of contact with each other and I daresay that the same holds true for Mr. and Mrs. Greengrass. There is nothing to be ashamed of and you will not find anyone here at the school more supportive of the two of you than me. We have decided that this fall, that the married students’ tower will be available to all bonded students and that the normal restrictions on students sharing living quarters will be lifted completely. It’s the only way to accommodate the needs that bonded students have.”

Ginny realized that her mother had lied to her outright and it was an uncomfortable feeling. “So....You’re not going to punish us for needing to be together at night?”

“That is correct, Ms. Weasley. You and your bond-mate will be treated no differently than any of the other bonded couples. Same-sex partnerships are, admittedly, unusual in the wizarding world, but they are not completely unheard of, either. The fact that you’re both so young does complicate things a bit, but not unreasonably so. I am sure we can work through any problems that might arise.”

The fiery redhead looked at him and then a small smirk made its way onto her face. “I hope that you will be more ready, sir, than you were for my mother.”

For whatever reason, her statement, made with a small, impish smile, caused a great deal of laughter on the Headmaster’s part and he decided that his confrontation with “Hurricane Molly” had been worth it, if the exchange was for ten months with Ginny Weasley. Whatever else she might or might not be...she was certainly funny.

Platform 9 & $\frac{3}{4}$ - London, England – Sunday, September 1, 1991 - 10:47 Am.

The security at Platform 9 & $\frac{3}{4}$ was exceptionally tight and Kingsley Shacklebolt liked it that way. An immensely powerful black man; who often dressed in the traditional Tutsi garb of his homeland when he was in the office, Kingsley watched as the thirty Aurors under his command checked and re-checked the platform and screened each of the students before they were allowed onto the Hogwarts Express. They were wearing a combination of standard (British) Muggle battle-gear – black fatigues with hardened black, multi-pocketed vests – and the corresponding black, armored, Muggle-military helmets and combat boots. Each had a well-known and feared patch on his/her left shoulder: Crossed black wands over a red pentagram. Because of a particularly bold press campaign, everyone in wizarding Britain knew the patch. It designated each officer as being part of the DMLE's newest hit-wizard group – the S.W.A.T. Team. What made them not Muggle law enforcement was the obvious lack of any firearms; the teams' use of wandless magic, and the presence of English long-swords, worn fighting-style, across their backs. They were a force to be reckoned with – even for the most ambitious dark wizard. Kingsley liked the fact that they were feared. It made for fewer confrontations with bad guys...and that meant that they had to use force much less often.

One of the benefits of having a Headmaster who was also the Supreme Mugwump of the Wizengamot was that he could ensure the security of his students simply by placing a call to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for the United Kingdom. While it was true that the Welsh had their own security, as did the Republic of Ireland, the DMLE always oversaw Hogwarts security for expediency's sake. Kingsley knew that it was also the fact that the DMLE had access to certain Muggle technologies that were better left undisclosed.

The nominal reason for the high security was that 'the boy-who-lived' had come to Hogwarts. His presence prompted a security blanket which had been thrown over all operations that could expose him to any outside threats. The Prime Minister of England, on advice of the Minister for Magic, had personally ordered a military cordon around Hogwarts Castle which extended for one hundred miles in every direction. That meant that no planes, boats, cars, or any other vehicle could be brought within the area. It also meant that there would be, for the next seven years, regular and heavily-armed military patrols,

of five hundred men or more, in the area. Kingsley thought it very sly of the Headmaster. He knew, too, that the fact that all of the military patrols had been issued fifty-caliber assault weapons and armor-piercing, silver-tipped, reduced-uranium ammunition that was capable of killing things like...giants, house-sized spiders, werewolves, vampires....was more than coincidental. Harry Potter would be as secure as their efforts could make him, whether he knew it or not.

Turning his attention back to the press of students getting onto the train, he saw Senior Auror Nymphadora Tonks ('Nym' or 'Tonks' to her friends) looking at one student with more than a casual eye. Walking over, he stopped and looked at the student as well. He was a tall-ish boy, with dark brown hair and brown eyes, and a small, silver serpent dangling from a necklace just inside the boy's shirt. It wasn't the necklace that had caught the younger Auror's attention, but rather his trunk. Her wand was vibrating and pointing, seemingly on its own, at the trunk – much like a drug-dog did for Muggle law enforcement.

"Open the trunk", she told the boy.

"No. And you can't make me."

Shacklebolt smiled. "And how do you come to that conclusion, young man?" he asked gently.

"My father is Bayle Zabini and he sits on the Council of the Wizengamot. I'm immune."

"Oh? Did he tell you that?" Kingsley asked, with a touch of humor in his voice. The fact that Bayle Zabini thought himself above the law was funny, given that no one, not even the Supreme Mugwump, was above the law. There was no concept of 'executive immunity' in the magical world, like there was in the Muggle world.

"No, but everyone knows it."

"Well, you just keep thinking that, son. Petrificus Totalus". The Auror's wand was out and the charm thrown before the boy even knew what was coming. Once the young Zabini was safely secured, the young

Auror lay his trunk down and proceeded to analyze the intricate locks which secured it.

“It’s a professional case, Sir. We’ll have to take it back to Headquarters and have one of the curse-breakers deal with it. It’s too dangerous to do here.”

“Do what you have to do. Take young Mr. Zabini here into protective custody. If there’s anything in that case that shouldn’t be, make sure he’s read his rights FIRST before you question him. Let me know if there’s anything that has to be confiscated or turned over to our brethren.” By ‘brethren’, Nymphadora Tonks knew he meant the Unspeakables; who’s job it was to deal with curse-threats that went beyond the normal scope or things that were products of family magics which had not been seen before.

Auror Tonks placed anti-disapparation cuffs on the young man and shackled his ankles with anti-portkey manacles. She didn’t want to ‘lose’ her catch, after all. Placing one hand on the boy and the other on the trunk, Nymphadora activated her private portkey and disappeared.

Once the train was fully loaded and underway, the twelve Aurors, including Shackbolt, set up patrols in the trains’ central corridor and made sure that no wands were in evidence anywhere. It would not do to have students hurting each other before they got to school.

Without the necessary cover and given that there were very serious adults with bad attitudes wandering the train, the Weasley twins decided that discretion was the better part of valor and kept to themselves. Likewise, any Slytherin student bent on trying to intimidate the younger students or students in the other houses quickly found out that their nonsense would not be tolerated and that the adults on board didn’t take kindly to their way of ‘socializing’.

Without Ginny, the twins were forced to suffer the presence of their youngest brother, Ron, and their elder brother, Percy. He was a fifth-year student who had just received his Prefects’ badge and, to the twins’ way of thinking, a five-hundred percent increase in the size of his head and ego. The internecine conflict had only just begun, they

figured. Whether Ginny would help out on their side of the conflict was yet to be determined; given what she had done over the summer, but their hopes were high that she could be persuaded to help them in their 'righteous cause'.

Ron, on the other hand, was a huge question-mark. His obsession with the Chudley Cannons, and in particular, its star seeker, William Wingbat, was decidedly odd they thought – perhaps even to the point of unhealthy. Neither Fred nor George had been able to puzzle out what Ron was all about. Girls were not something he thought about; that much was obvious. He was, as far as they could tell, all about food, Quidditch, and the Cannons. One strange thing about Ron was how fastidious he was about his room. It was neat and tidy to the point of weird – even if the entire room was done in shades of Orange (with the exception of his pillows, which were always a vaguely-familiar shade of brown).

The other thing about Ron which was very much outside of the norm was his talent with art and spatial geometry. Everything was a 3D puzzle to him; especially Quidditch. Ron could do vector mathematics (speed, distance, acceleration and angular momentum) in his head the way their mother did the monthly household budget to the Knut. The same talent translated to his dominance on the chess-board. He had never lost...to anyone, ever. No adult stood a chance against him and the kids in the magical village; the few who liked the game at least, had given up trying to beat him a long time ago. His teachers all knew better than to try their hand against him in the game, because they knew it would only end badly for them. If he was feeling generous, a game might go as long as twenty moves. If he was feeling vindictive, as he did sometimes, it ended in the minimum 6 moves required by the rules.

The eldest Weasleys – Bill and Charlie – had already been graduated from Hogwarts. Charlie had gone into Dragon-keeping in Romania while Bill had become one of Gringotts youngest-ever curse-breakers and was on assignment in Egypt.

It was going to be an interesting year, the twins thought, as they huddled in their train-car. None of their products had even been detected by the Aurors at the platform and their treasured raw

ingredients – which they were carrying in specially-designed compartments in their trunks – had gone unnoticed as well. All in all, the year was starting out just fine. All they had to do was pass the house sorting and they'd be on their way back to Gryffindor Tower and the über-secret, third-floor storage closet which waited for them.

As the sun finally fell behind the western mountains, the giant, garish-red Hogwarts Express pulled into Hogsmeade Station and children began clamoring off the train.

Fred and George smiled as they looked down the length of the station-platform and saw their friend Rubeus Hagrid gathering the first-year students about him and ushering them towards the magical boats which would take them across the lake and to the bowels of the Castle. They knew about the magical Thestrals which pulled the carriages – even if you couldn't see them, but they had not been able to figure out what made the boats go. They were pretty sure that the boats, too, had some sort of magical creature pulling them, but they had never been able to figure out what that creature might be. For that failure, they blamed their lack of access to the restricted section of the schools' library.

Unnoticed by the twins, or by anyone else, were the Aurors who guarded the station and its transient occupants. The full compliment from the train was present, along with more than thirty Welsh Aurors who had volunteered for the four-hour shift. That brought the number to forty-three Aurors; which made the area as secure as anyone could hope for.

A massive anti-apparition field had come into existence the moment that the train stopped. Everyone one of the Aurors could feel it. Kingsley Shacklebolt smiled to himself. The field was strong enough that only two people could have cast it and neither one was anything but a friend to Harry Potter.

Looking about, he spotted the source. Minerva McGonagall was standing with her magical staff in both hands. One end was glowing a deep ruby-red. No one would dare cross her while she held that staff, because it amplified the caster's power by a factor of one hundred. Such amplification was enough to turn a mild stunning spell deadly.

What no one knew was that Harry Potter was already safe and within the walls at Hogwarts; waiting for all of the students to return, so he could get to know all of them and begin to truly find his place in the wizarding world.

The Great Hall – Hogwarts – 6 Pm., Sunday, September 1, 1991.

Almost seven hundred young people filled the Great Hall of the school. A seventh of them waited, anxiously, to be sorted and discover where the magical hat thought that they belonged.

The woman who called herself Minerva McGonagall moved to the center of the dais and looked out over the assembled throng. Extending her hands, she signaled for quiet and eventually, the din of anxious, excited voices diminished. “Thank you. My name is Minerva McGonagall. I am the Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts and a teacher of Transfiguration and conjuration. Welcome to all the new students among us! I hope that your next seven years will be happy and productive. For the returning students, I want to let you know that there are significant changes ahead for all of this year and that this week will be critical. Some of you have brothers or sisters here and we want you to know that it brings us, the teachers here, a great deal of joy to be able to teach all of you. I know that each of you will bring a great deal of pride to your families.”

She paused and looked around; trying to collect her thoughts. Harry and Hermione were looking up at her, expectantly, as were Draco and Daphne. Luna and Ginny were sitting together at one end of the traditionally Hufflepuff table and they, too, were paying close attention. “Perhaps many of you saw the Aurors on the train today, and at Platform 9 & $\frac{3}{4}$. I wanted to address that before wild, unfounded rumors started flying amongst you. The reason that security was tight today was that there are some special and therefore important students among us now and they have to be protected. The Aurors were close at hand to make sure that the few remaining Death Eaters who followed Tom Riddle in his last, insane rise to power were unable to present any kind of threat.”

Draco thought to Daphne, “figures that my father would cause such a ruckus. I wonder if anyone will figure out that Harry was the reason that all of the Aurors were around. Probably no one, but it would be interesting to see who can put the pieces together.”

Daphne smirked and then replied to him silently, “most of them are sheep, love. Not just sheep, but pretty stupid sheep. I think that Severus calls them ‘sheople’. Not bad. I wonder if Daddy could put it on a shirt and make some money with it, like Muggles do.”

“Only you would be trying to make some money off it, love. Can’t say it’s a bad idea, though. Maybe you should owl home and tell them.” Draco squeezed her hand and pulled her close, so that he could feel her body warm against his.

The Headmistress looked like she was ready to continue speaking, after the initial reaction to her words had died down. “I know that some of you will spend the next several days trying to figure out whom I referring to when I say ‘special’ and ‘important’. I, and the Headmaster, both ask you not to do so. Successful guessing could seriously undermine our efforts to protect the individuals and unsuccessful guessing will do nothing but feed the rumor mill and otherwise misdirect attention and energies away from your studies.

Now, on to other matters. We’ve had a number of staff changes over the summer and I want to announce those now. First, Professor Binns has retired. When I say retired, I want to tell you that we performed, at his request, an exorcism and he has successfully departed this realm for the next great adventure. None of you will see him again until your time has come to complete that same journey and we hope and pray that for all of you, that time will not come for hundreds of years.

Secondly, Professor Kettleburn has retired and left Hogwarts for good. Her position will now be filled by our own, Professor Rubeus Hagrid.”

There was wild and tumultuous applause at that and it caused the half-giant to wipe a tear from one eye as he stood to acknowledge the applause. It was obvious that he appreciated the outpouring of love and affection that came from the vast majority of students.

“Yes, yes. We are extremely pleased to announce that by personal request, an invitation to teach was extended to Professor Hagrid by the Minister for Magic at the beginning of the summer and that he has, under the private tutelage of Professor Sprout and Headmaster Dumbledore, passed his Mastery in both magical botany and Care of Magical Creatures. Please understand that Professor Hagrid, by earning his Masteries, has become a full-time, permanent member of the staff and can give detentions as well as give and take house-points.”

It was a lie, of course, and more than a few teachers knew it. Hagrid had been privately pardoned by the Minister himself for events that had happened more than fifty years ago and that his wand had been snapped not as a result of a trial, but by order of a corrupt Minister and an even more corrupt Wizengamot. It was an open secret that the Headmaster had taken Hagrid under his ‘wing’ and personally taught the half-giant every conceivable type of magic as a personal penance to Hagrid for having allowed the original events to happen. By the time that the giant had taken his Mastery exams, he was able to do things that only a truly magical creature could do. His 24” Oak and Giantess Hair wand made him exceptionally powerful and his training made him more than formidable. No creature was beyond his ability to control, nor was there a plant that he could not grow or didn’t understand.

She continued, “There are two others who have come among us for the year. We have a new Muggle-studies teacher, Dr. Lawrence Kettle. Dr. Kettle lives full-time in down-town London; is married to the deputy-head of the Department of external affairs for the Ministry; was graduated Summa cum Laude from the Salem Academy; and then graduated from the University of Wisconsin at Madison with a degree in psychology. He was awarded a Master’s degree in Psychology from the University of Chicago for his work in social dynamics inside of closed societies, and has a Doctorate in Theoretical Physics from Cambridge University, London. He is also a licensed social-worker in both the Muggle and magical worlds. You will ignore or dismiss his teachings at your peril.” The students didn’t know what to make of the slim, bearded man who sat to Hagrid’s right, but many applauded politely anyway. “The other addition to our staff is Remus Lupin, who

has agreed at the very last minute to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. We are grateful to him for his enthusiasm and his willingness to step in at the last moment. Professor Lupin will be joining us tomorrow night as he is still in transit from his new home in Poland. Professor Lupin is the EU's foremost forensic pathologist and is the lead crime-scene investigator for the European DMLE in The Hague. We are very grateful that they were willing to give him a years' sabbatical so that he could be with us. As a side note, we hope that Professor Quirrell will eventually show up anyway, if only to let us know that he is all right."

She looked down at her notes and realized that she had nothing further to say, so she walked over and picked up the sorting hat. "Ok, so, without further delay, let the sorting begin. Abbot, Hannah." Hannah got up excited and a little nervous, and fairly ran to the dais, so that she could be sorted. Once the old hat was on her head, it pondered a moment before calling out "Hufflepuff!"

The list was long, but eventually it reached "Granger, Hermione! Potter, Harry!" and the bonded couple got up and walked, hand-in-hand to the where the Headmistress stood. She looked at them and smiled, ignoring the almost overpowering din of conversation that had sprung up the moment that Harry's name had been called along with the pretty, bushy-haired girl. Ignoring all of it, the young couple sat side by side on the stool and felt the hat expand to cover their heads together.

"Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Potter. I was wondering how long it would be until I sorted you, Mr. Potter. Your bond is unexpected, but not unwelcome, is it? You both have fine minds. Lots of talent in both of you and you both have a powerful desire to learn more. A good bit of ambition too. Hmmm. Hard to say. Ravenclaw for both of you? You'd be challenged there and wouldn't have to hide those impressive intellects or talents. Or perhaps Gryffindor? Your father, Harry, was a brave young man. Never afraid to protect his friends or take a chance when it could do good."

"Where do you want to go, love?" Harry asked Hermione. "I'll go wherever you want."

“I don’t know, Harry. Ravenclaw has a great reputation, but so does Gryffindor. I’d rather not have to be constantly defending what we’re learning or doing though. Ravenclaw, then?”

“Let’s.”

“If you’re both alright with it, then Ravenclaw it is.”

The moment that they decided, the hat loudly announced to the assembled students that its choice for the Potters was “Ravenclaw!” There was a stunned silence as the young couple made their way over to the Ravenclaw table. No one could believe that Harry Potter had gone to Ravenclaw.

There was some considerable shock at the choice among the school’s professors – most all of whom had taught James Potter and his closest friends, Lily Evans, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew. Each had his or her own reason for believing that James’ son could go nowhere but Gryffindor, but none of them knew Harry well enough yet to understand the young man’s private motivations.

Once the initial shock had passed, “Greengrass, Daphne; Greengrass, Draco” were called and they, too, walked hand-in-hand up to where the Headmistress stood with hat in hand. Sitting down, Draco and Daphne made themselves comfortable and waited for the hat to assess them. “Hmmmm. Fine, fine minds, both of you. Also a thirst to prove yourselves and to not repeat patterns of the past. I see that you are as loyal as any can be and are willing to take chances to protect each other. A very difficult choice. Slytherin is out. Gryffindor would have you both.”

“No. I can’t bring myself to want to be in with them, even if I want to get away from my family. It would be like trading one problem for another.”

Daphne was less hesitant about Gryffindor and she told Draco so. “I’ll go where you want, Draco. All I want is to be with you and to be left alone.”

“If that’s what you both want then, I think the best choice for you both is....HUFFLEPUFF!”

Satisfied with the choice, Draco and Daphne walked over to the Hufflepuff table and joined Hannah and her other new friends. There was a quiet celebration as the loyal Hufflepuffs thought and talked together about what the new make-up of their house was going to mean for the coming year.

The shock of Draco’s defection to Hufflepuff created an angry, emotional storm within certain quarters - mostly the already marginalized factions of Slytherin house, while others were quietly grateful that he was going into another house. The biggest news, and therefore the greatest talking point among the other Slytherins, was Draco’s apparent relationship with Daphne Greengrass and the fact that he had taken her last name.

Pansy Parkinson, the only daughter of Gruoch and Malcom Parkinson, thought about what she had seen so far meant for her and for her family. She recognized that for everyone else, the biggest bombshell of the night so far had been the sorting of Harry Potter and Hermione Granger into Ravenclaw. Her personal take on it was that the far more important news was that Harry and Hermione had bonded and become a couple. How they had bonded was less important than the fact that the most desirable ‘catch’ to ever come to Hogwarts was already off the market.

Pansy itched to see the sorting over with so that she could get to her owl and send her parents the coded letter that she was already composing in her head. She hoped that they’d be able to write back within a day or so and give her their take on the evenings’ events. While her father was a brilliant businessman and a compassionate and loving father, it was her mother who was the politician in the family. If anyone could give her an accurate read on the import of the days’ events, it was her mother.

Eventually, the Headmaster rose and dismissed everyone to his or her respective dorm. Harry and Hermione made their apologies to their fellow Ravenclaws and made their way back to the tower which would be their home for the next seven years. As they walked along,

Daphne and Draco, as well as Luna and Ginny caught up with them and soon, the six of them were immersed in conversation about what had happened and what it all meant.

The group had almost made it to the hidden portal on the seventh floor which served as the entrance to their dorm when they were cut off and surrounded by six older students; each dressed in robes of Slytherin Silver and Green.

“You’re done, Draco. You should have left the country when you had the chance.”

Wands had come out and it was clear that the six Slytherins had not shown up to throw Draco a tea-party. “Why’s that, Nott?”

The black-haired, slightly buck-toothed boy sneered. “Your father put a bounty on your head. He’s offered ten thousand galleons to whomever kills you and now I’m going to collect it.” Abraham Edward Nott was a braggart as well as a bully, just like his father, Draco thought. Well, we’re just going to have to play this out and hope we get lucky.

Out of view of the tall, menacing, but slightly gangly boy, Harry and Hermione both drew their wands and prepared for the inevitable. Draco taunted the boy, hoping to buy some time. “And you think you’re the one to do it? You’re pathetic, Abby. You couldn’t collect the bounty on a worm, much less one of us. Your aim is so bad that I’m surprised your parents even let you out of the house.”

Draco had hoped to keep the boy talking; thereby buying them all some time, but it wasn’t to be. Nott’s wand came up and he said “Avada...” and never finished the terrible curse because he didn’t see Harry’s incoming hex. Suddenly, there was a terrible, ghastly squelching sound and a violent spray of blood in all directions as Nott’s head abruptly collapsed to the size of a plum; effectively stopping the curse...and killing the boy where he stood. The encounter had sent Draco’s heart racing and he couldn’t believe what had just happened. Once Nott had begun the killing curse, Draco thought that his time was up. For all of his previous experience, he wasn’t prepared to try to fend off an unforgiveable.

When the other Slytherins saw what had happened, they panicked and fled. Harry and Hermione, on the other hand, both turned and raced to a nearby classroom, where they immediately became violently ill; vomiting into an available trashcan.

The sound of pounding footsteps alerted Ginny, Luna, Draco, and Daphne that adult help had finally arrived. Draco looked first at Harry and Hermione; who were both kneeling and retching over the trashcan which they had expropriated for the purpose, and then to Johan Severus Snape – who was leading a procession up the last set of stairs which included the Headmaster, Headmistress, and the school's medi-witch.

Moving in a way that belied his age, Snape took the last flight of stairs two at a time and went running to Harry and Hermione. Draco couldn't hear their conversation, but understood intuitively what they must have said to the potions-master. Anticipating the man's request, Draco touched his wand to his temple and drew out the complete memory of everything that had just happened. He offered it to the potions-master silently and the Snape took the proffered memory willingly and touched it to his own forehead; allowing it to absorb into his thoughts.

Johan Snape 'saw' the entire, forty-five second confrontation and knew immediately that Harry had done the right thing, even if it made him grossly ill to re-live. Snape repeated the memory process with the Headmaster and Headmistress, letting them see what Harry had done to protect both Draco and Daphne.

Finally, after several long minutes, the Headmaster put his hand on Hermione's and Harry's shoulders and asked them if they were well enough to stand. Though his stomach (and Hermione's, he noted sadly) was still reeling from the emotional trauma of having just killed someone, Harry felt that he could stand and answer simple questions.

The good thing was that no one blamed him for what had just happened. It was obvious that Harry had acted in complete self-defense and had used a simple shrinking hex as his tool. Dumbledore thought it possible, and even probable, that Harry's move would be

incorporated into the next Auror personal defense handbook. It wasn't at all fancy, but it was unbelievably effective and unlikely to be stopped by a bad guy in a fire-fight on the grounds that it wouldn't be seen as a threat until it was too late.

It didn't take long for the Headmaster's questions to be asked and the six young people breathed a huge sigh of relief that all six of them would walk away from the confrontation unscathed. Hermione and Harry, though, were still trembling with the shock of it.

Once inside their common room, Draco, Daphne, Luna, Ginny, Harry, and Hermione fell into what could only be described as a 'cuddle-puddle'. Each of the girls took turns hugging Harry and privately reassuring him that he would never be alone and that they all appreciated what he had done.

Hermione soon took a much-relieved Harry off to bed and the 'cuddle-puddle' dissolved.

Late Sunday Night, September 1st, Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts

The floo connection in the Headmasters' office had gotten a work-out throughout the evening, as Ministry officials and Aurors had come and gone. None of the visitors that the floo disgorged, however, had quite tried his patience the way that Theodore Nott, Sr. had done. It was clear that the head of House Nott was used to getting his way and it was therefore not surprising, to 'Albus' that the senior Nott had made the classical mistake that all bullies do: pre-judging what your enemies can do to before one has adequately tested them on the field of battle.

The man's bluster had started almost immediately. First it was demands for an explanation; then moved to a rant about 'half-bloods' having too much power and privilege, and finally got to the crux of the matter. "I want the punk who killed my son brought down here RIGHT NOW, DUMBLEDORE."

"Or what?", Albus said almost serenely.

“I WILL FIND HIM MYSELF AND KILL HIM.”

Myrddin smiled. The only real drawback to being ‘Albus Dumbledore’ was that he could not do away with people like Nott immediately. He was forced to be patient, kind, sympathetic, understanding, and a whole host of other good and worthwhile things, even in the face of unmitigated arrogance and stupidity. Myrddin watched as the elder Nott started to get red in the face with his misplaced anger. “Hmmm. Since he’s already on my ‘shite’ list, I wonder if it might be worthwhile to teach the Potters some of the ‘gray’ magics. Never know when they might get to take a free shot at the bastard.”

“Now, now, Theodore, I’m sure that you’d not try to kill the last remaining scion of House Potter. Your son was killed as he prepared to use the killing curse against another student and Potter defended the boy. The DMLE has already cleared Harry. Any action you might be thinking of taking in retribution might not sit well with some of the families. Wizarding pride and all, being what it is....” ‘Albus’ was all too happy to insinuate to the elder Nott that since the Potters were the third-oldest wizarding family in all of the United Kingdom, that things might go badly for him, if he were to declare a blood-feud with them. “Blood purity” cut both ways. Either you were for it and did anything you could to ‘protect the families’ or you didn’t. Traditionalists – especially the hard-core ones on the fringes of wizarding society – were impossible to please on the subject. Of course, if word ever got out, and he knew it would sooner than later, about Harry being bonded to a ‘first-born’ girl, there would be hell to pay.

“I don’t care, Albus. If HARRY FUCKING POTTER killed my son, then I will extract a death for a death.”

“Well, that’s all very interesting, Theodore, but if you’re going to make threats towards a student who’s in my care, I will tell you that if I ever find you anywhere on the school grounds, in Hogsmeade, or anywhere near Lord Potter, I will kill you myself.”

Theodore Nott, Sr. looked at the Headmaster and realized, given the powerful magical aura that had just sprung up around him, that he meant every word of it. Worse, he knew that the Headmaster could

do it with ease; as if he were no more than a fly Dumbledore was brushing off his shoulder. Grindlewald had been thousands of times more powerful than he was and Dumbledore had still decimated him.

Suddenly, the slightly younger man could not scramble fast enough towards the floo. He didn't say anything more and in his haste to get away, forgot his travelling cloak and bag.

After the green flames had died away, Myrddin smiled to himself. "What a stupid son of a bitch. No wonder his son got himself killed. Gene-pool in that family is getting too shallow there. As the Muggles say...probably time for some bleach."

The Great Hall – Hogwarts – Monday, September 2nd, 7:25 Am.

The Hall was as loud as it had ever been. Everyone, it seemed, knew about Theodore Nott's demise at the hands of Harry Potter. How that had come to pass was uncertain, but all anyone wanted to talk about was how a first-year student had managed to kill a seventh-year. No one, save those who were present, knew that it had been as simple as a shrinking hex. It seemed completely impossible...and yet the elder of the Nott brothers lay stone-cold dead in his family's mausoleum.

Pansy Parkinson had been forced, for the sake of clarity and completeness, to make a middle-of-the-night, covert run up to owlry, with an additional, specially coded note to her parents, saying that Potter was everything that they had hoped – but that he was already bonded and therefore not available for a marriage contract. She watched her owl clear the school's wards by flying towards the forbidden forest and out of the hands of those who were watching the Castle.

She wasn't alone, though. A half-dozen other 'secret' missives about the previous nights' happenings left Hogwarts during the early morning hours before dawn. All but one was expected by the law enforcement and other forces assembled in and around Hogwarts Castle. Five out of the six were dealt with as soon as the birds cleared the school's magical southern boundary on their way towards

Greater London. The final letter – the only other one besides Pansy's that got through undetected – rode on the leg of a non-descript, European starling that had been enchanted for just such a purpose. A tiny, winged beetle had scuttled up the leg of the bird which had perched on the top of the northern-most wall of the western tower in the blackness of night and hurriedly attached the small cartridge and its incendiary contents before sending the bird off to its master in London.

Well satisfied, the tiny beetle animagus crawled back down the inner wall of the tower and found a warm, dry hole that would offer shelter and warmth against the cold night air.

7:35 Am. – Hogwarts' Great Hall – Morning owl-mail delivery

Harry Potter sat near one of the Halls' large fireplaces with his wife at his side and his familiar in his lap. At the moment, he was completely disregarding the fact that the table he was sitting at was not the traditional Ravenclaw table, but rather, the Hufflepuff table. For some inexplicable reason, Harry thought that it was important that he and Hermione be seen in the company of Draco and Daphne, Luna and Ginny, at the Hufflepuff table. Hermione understood his gut feeling, even if she couldn't put words to it either.

The Mail owls had more or less entered through the upper-most, open windows of the Hall as one large flight. The owls circled the Hall once; twice, and then made more or less controlled landings near or on the tables where their masters sat. This particular morning, a gorgeous, snowy-white owl landed at the table in front of Harry and looked at him curiously. She lifted one leg and Harry saw that she had a small note clutched in one claw. Hermione reached out with one hand and took the note, while Harry reached for a piece of bacon to feed the owl.

Hermione unrolled the note and read it silently, and 'spoke' it silently to Harry, via their bond.

September 2nd, 1991

Dear Harry,

This beautiful owl is yours. I bought her for you as a birthday gift. I was sorry that I didn't get you something over the summer and I realized that you and Hermione might like to have your own. Let me know what you name her.

Also, I need to see you, Harry, before the day is out, regarding your other familiar. Having a Wyvern is a huge responsibility and you've got to be ready for it. If you come see me, I can give you a book that Charlie Weasley gave me several years ago about them. You need to make sure all of the fees for it are paid to the Ministry by the 15th of September or you could get into a lot of trouble.

Can't wait to talk to you! I have loads of pictures of your folks that I want to show you.

Regards,

Rubeus Hagrid,

Harry was so excited about the owl that he didn't see the stares that were starting to come at him and Hermione as various students held up copies of the Daily Prophet.

It was a good thing that the students weren't the only ones who had active subscriptions to the rag which passed itself off as the paper of record in the British wizarding world. The woman styling herself as 'Minerva McGonagall' picked up her copy and read the article that was the 'top of the fold'.

"THE BOY WHO KILLS"

By Rita Skeeter

Monday, September 2nd, 1991

From where I sit hiding at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, I am surrounded by intrigue and scandal – and it's not even the first day of classes! Last night, after the students had been dismissed from the Great Hall of the school – which functions as both

its communal dinning hall as well as the site of many of the schools 'all-school' functions – a group of six students: Ms. Ginevra Weasley, Ms. Luna Lovegood, Mr. Draco Greengrass née Malfoy, Mrs. Daphne Greengrass, Mr. Harry Potter and Mrs. Hermione Potter made their way out of the Hall and up seven long flights of stairs.

Where were they going? They were going to a separate residential tower; one reserved, as I am now led to understand, for married couples. You read that right. At first, I was confused about why those six – four girls and two boys – were headed off to a tower, separate and apart from the Houses into which they had been sorted. Ever the intrepid reporter, I made my presence known, discreetly, to a well-placed source inside the school. My contact informed me that there were three separate couples. The first is a very rare, and highly controversial, same-sex couple. Ms. Luna Lovegood, the only daughter of Xenophilous and Marie Lovegood has formed a martial bond with Ms. Ginevra "Ginny" Weasley – the only daughter of Molly and Arthur Weasley. My contact was unable to give me much detail about them, other than to say that they are both very young. Ms. Weasley is not even 11 yet! That the Headmaster would allow such a couple to attend the preeminent school of magic in Great Britain is outrageous; given the pressing need for more children in our overall population. More, it is a direct insult to every witch and wizard who believes in traditional values.

Whether a same-sex couple is allowed to attend Hogwarts is a secondary issue compared to the much more dramatic news that Mr. Harry Potter - 'The Boy who Lived' is indeed married. He has apparently formed a very rare and quite powerful soul-bond with a young muggle-born girl named Hermione Granger. The extraordinary circumstances that led to that bonding and the nature of their previous relationship, if any, have escaped my attempts to ascertain, but rest assured that I will not give up until all the facts are out in the open. Surely, every eligible young woman in the United Kingdom, save one, today mourns the departure of Mr. Potter from the rolls of the most desirable, eligible young men in the country.

As for the erstwhile Mr. Malfoy, I have it on good authority that he has abandoned his family name and has left the family's good graces by

bonding with the extraordinarily pretty and charming Ms. Greengrass, in contravention of his fathers' explicit wishes.

It was in Mr. Greengrasses' defense that Mr. Potter killed Lord-designate Abraham Nott last night. All I have been able to discover is that young Mr. Nott was indeed trying to kill Mr. Greengrass – using the killing curse - and that Mr. Potter struck him down using nothing more than a minimizing hex. Unfortunately, it was a minimizing hex aimed at his head and Mr. Nott was unable to deflect it.

What caused Mr. Nott to try to use an unforgiveable and why he felt that it was the only possible course of action remains a mystery – and probably always will. The Headmaster spent several hours, after the killing, speaking with Aurors and others from the DMLE and, as of this writing, I can report that the school is still swarming with law enforcement officers. Apparently, the Headmaster thought that if there was sufficient security, he could keep the incident under wraps.

One wonders what other events may yet occur in a school filled with sometimes hostile, hormone-poisoned children, married or otherwise.

I will continue to report for as long as I am able.

'Albus Dumbledore' finished reading the revealing article and rather than discuss his thoughts one at a time with the staff, he stood and looked out over the assembled students. His deep purple robes billowed a bit as he waved his hands; signaling for quiet.

"Ladies and Gentlemen – colleagues – It is apparent from the article this morning that I'm sure you've all read by now that we have a spy in our midst. I am asking for your cooperation as we sweep the castle this morning. Not one of us is safe while we have an unwelcome visitor among us. I am going to lock down the Castle this morning and we will begin searching.

Now, in order to make this a learning experience, I am going to teach you all a charm. I don't, of course, expect the new students to be able to do this. If you are newly sorted, just watch those who have been here for a while. You'll see magic done well, I hope! And don't worry that you're new among us. Just know that you'll be the ones doing the

teaching in a couple of years! Ok, now, some of you seventh-years would have run across this charm later on this year in your studies. Think of this as small gift from your Headmaster in appreciation of your hard work up to this point.

Now, if you would all take out your wands.” He waited for all of the students to do so. Some had to go scrambling to their book-bags to get them, but eventually, all had their wands out and pointing outwards, as if towards some unknown threat. “Very good. Now, the charm itself is ‘Animus Reveleo’. Please, repeat after me: “Animus Reveleo!”

Everyone did so, some with more gusto than others. After a few tries, the Headmaster decided that everyone could, at least, pronounce the charm properly. “Ok. You’ve all mastered that. Good. Now, here’s the hard part. It is a charm that is powered entirely by the will of the caster. There is no specific wand movement. Just point and repeat the charm. However – you have to be thinking very clearly about revealing a hidden form. If you have to, think about it as if you’re trying to reveal a friends’ secret or looking for something hidden in a friend. That’s the only way I can describe the necessary mind-set for this charm.

Here is what we are going to do. First, the mornings’ first two class-periods are cancelled. I want this search to be done with as quickly as possible. We will break into teams. The teachers will divvie themselves into equal groups and each group will take a house. I would like this to be done without the usual inter-house bickering...so please, consider that you’re all working for your school this morning and not for your individual house. A new broom of your choice will be the prize to the person or persons who are successful! “

There was an enormous roar in response to the Headmaster’s declaration and suddenly, everyone was up for the hunt.

9:45 Am. – Hogwarts’ Great Hall

The two hours, for most all of the students, had been singularly unsuccessful – and there was a good amount of bickering among some groups as they made their way back to the Great Hall. However,

one small group had stumbled onto something very interesting indeed during its return to the Hall.

Professor Andromeda Vector, a beautiful and talented witch who was relatively new on the staff, was accompanying Colin Creevey, Pansy Parkinson, Tracy Davis, Justin Finch-Fletchly, Ginny Weasley, and Luna Lovegood. Because of the size of the school and the unpredictable nature of its staircases, the group happened to take a wrong turn and find themselves inside the stairway of the schools' western tower. Thinking that it might not have been explored yet, the group took out their wands and slowly made their way up the slightly rickety wooden stairs. At various points, the kids pointed their wands at the spiders and other insects and hit them with the charm that they had all been taught. It was fun, if a bit slow-going. There were a lot of spiders and other insects!

Eventually, the group got to a landing that was at a turning-out point, just below the last set of stairs up to the roof of the tower. There was a great deal of dust and it was pretty obvious that no one had been up the stairs recently. As they were all about to turn around and go back down, Colin Creevey saw something that didn't look right. A small black beetle was hiding in a larger-than-normal crack between two large rocks in the wall. He put his hand on Tracy Davis' arm; catching her attention. She turned and saw what Colin was pointing at. A big smile came across her face and she got everyone else's attention. Andromeda Vector looked over Ginny Weasley's shoulder and looked at the beetle. It looked unnatural to her, too.

"Well, what are you all waiting for? Wands up, please and remember the charm. On three. One, two, "Animus Reveleo!"

A moment later, the beetle started to grow and it fell out, unceremoniously; hitting the floor of the platform with a 'thump!'.

The change was complete a moment later and a woman lay stunned and then bound. It was Rita Skeeter...and she looked very surprised indeed.

So the small, victorious band made its way back to the Great Hall with an ugly, ungainly woman, bound tight in hemp rope, floating in

front of them. When the doors opened and let them in, the rest of the school gasped, as if the students shared one body.

‘Albus’ rose and moved to the end of the head-table; where he waited for the small group to make it down the long aisle. Once they were half-way, he was able to make out that it was indeed Rita Skeeter who had been found. He was glad that he Johan had taken the time to slip out during the search and retrieve his personal store of Veritiserum. It would make questioning Rita that much easier.

Potions Lab – Dungeon – Hogwarts; - Monday, September 2nd, 11:45 Am.

Second-year potions promised to be a difficult, but exciting class. After Abraham Nott’s death, the Slytherins in the class, all of whom were second-years, decided that Harry was not worth harassing. One student did make a snide and nasty comment about Hermione and her parentage when Snape’s attention was elsewhere, but neither Harry nor Hermione could be made to rise to the bait during class. They did, however, make a note of the person who had made the comment and silently vowed to ensure that the particular student had a change of heart – whether she wanted it or not.

Third-year Defense against the Dark Arts was the most exciting class of the day. Not only did Harry and Hermione get a chance to stretch their abilities, but Harry made a discovery that would forever alter how he felt about the Headmaster.

A tall-ish, 35 year-old man, with a prominent scar from just in front of his left ear to down below his shirt-collar, Remus Lupin looked older than his years. His hair was already salt-and-pepper and slightly receding. His eyes were dark blue and his nose looked like it had a small chunk missing from it at the end.

Hermione entered the classroom first, just ahead of Harry, five minutes before the ‘official’ start of class. Her wavy, cinnamon-brown hair swept around her shoulders and obscured the professors’ vision until Harry had cleared the door and stepped to his wife’s side.

Rising from where he sat behind the temporary desk in the DADA, Remus Lupin stared at the two young people. He had been notified ahead of time that there were three bonded couples in the school and that he might be particularly interested in one of them, but he had not been told who they were. Since he had missed the sorting and the after-dinner announcements, he was less informed than he should have been.

Green eyes. Brilliant green eyes and black hair. It took all of about two seconds for Remus Lupin to puzzle out who the new students were. Throwing himself across the room, he almost knocked the young man off his feet as he embraced him. "Harry!"

It was all Remus could say for several long minutes as the eleven years of tears that he had held back came loose in a torrent. It was the guilt that he felt for all the time that he had been away from the young man for whom he had been named co-godfather.

Harry didn't know who the man was, but it was clear that he was no threat and so he let the hug happen. Finally, Hermione stepped in and touched the man on the arm. "Professor?"

Hermione's gentle voice caused the man to break off the hug and fall backwards against a desk. "You look so much like Lily" he said. "She had those same eyes."

"You knew my mum?"

"God yes, Harry. She, James, Sirius Black, Johan, and I were inseparable for all of our last four years together. Actually, your mother didn't really join us until sixth year, but she had always hung around us before then. We were the "Marauders" of Hogwarts. I watched as Johan and your mother circled around each other more and more their last two years. Everyone thought that they were going to get together...."

"But his mother forbade the marriage and threatened to curse him and my mother if they went ahead anyway....I know"

“Well, yes. That’s exactly. Johan was devastated by it. I had never seen him cry before, but he did, the night that he received the owl from the bitch. It was just before Halloween.” That was news to Harry, but it didn’t surprise him. “Anyway, your mother and father finally got together during the early spring of our seventh year and they were married just over a year after they were graduated. You were born at the end of July, 1980. Well, they had been married for about three years by then. Their anniversary was July 17th.”

Harry looked at him, goggle-eyed.

Remus Lupin paused for a moment. “Now, I’ve been told that there are three bonded couples here at Hogwarts and that all three of them are among first-year students. I saw you two come in and you were holding hands and standing awfully close together. Is there something that I should know?”

Harry grinned sheepishly. “Well, this is my wife, Hermione Jane Potter, so I guess that’s a yes.”

Lupin’s jaw practically hit the ground at the word ‘wife’. When he had recovered himself somewhat, he looked at the pair. “Alright Harry, we have a few more minutes before class starts, so spill. What do you mean by ‘wife’?”

Hermione looked at the man; trying to decide whether she could trust him enough to tell him everything. She probed him a bit with her growing legilimency skills and found no animus or hostile intent. Harry did the same and found memories swirling in the man’s head that dealt with a beautiful woman and warm feelings. He couldn’t get more than that at first pass and decided not to try for more.

“Professor, Hermione and I have a soul-bond. The moment we touched, when we first met at Flourish and Blotts, we were able to hear each other’s thoughts and see each other’s memories. We’ve gotten stronger in that since then, but we’ve made marital vows to each other since then and exchanged rings.”

She held up the ring that adorned her left ring finger and to the man’s shock, he saw Lily Potter’s wedding ring. It was something he’d never

forget: a pear-cut 2.75 ct. perfect white diamond, with baguette-cut red sapphires on either side. On the girls' hand, it looked absolutely huge. Harry sported James' ring: a bi-metallic ring of platinum and mythal, with small diamonds in a chain down the middle. He felt the familiar twinge of jealousy that he had always felt looking at the ring. It was just one of those things.

"So, you're telling me that you two were both in Flourish and Blotts at the same time...and just happened to touch...and by simply touching, you bonded?"

"No, not really. You see, Hermione and I had been dreaming about each other for as long as either of us can remember. We had always been in each other's thoughts...like we were trying to find each other or something. I just know that the moment I saw her, I had to go to her. Now we can't be physically apart for more than a half-hour or so or we start to get physically sick."

Remus Lupin shook his head. "Just like James, Harry. You're very definitely his son. He never did anything the usual way, either."

"Professor? May I ask you a question?"

"Harry, you're going to have to get used to the fact that you can ask me anything. I may not always answer completely – depending on who else is involved in the answer – but you can always ask. I owe you that and so much more."

"Well, when Johan took me to my vaults at Gringotts after I became emancipated. I found my parents' portraits there and I talked to them. They told me that I'm to use whatever galleons I have to get Sirius free from Azkaban. If you knew Sirius....can you help me do what my parents asked?"

Seeing students gathering at the doorway from the corner of his eye, Lupin cut Harry off. "Later, Harry. Maybe tonight. I will tell you everything I know...and yes, I want to help."

Realizing that he had been cut off for a reason, Harry told Hermione silently that they probably ought to find seats next to each other and

that they shouldn't say anything more about his connection to the professor until they knew whom they could trust in the class.

The class itself turned out to be a great deal more work, but also more fun, than either Harry or Hermione had anticipated. They did not mention to Professor Lupin that Harry had bonded with a Wyvern, as the proto-dragons were not classified as 'dark', and because Harry did not want the added attention that the revelation would bring. Hermione sympathized with his desire to deflect attention and hoped that she could figure out a way to help Harry get the kinds of answers he needed without getting into trouble.

At the end of the class, when the other students were gathering up their belongings, Lupin stopped by Hermione's desk, as she was closer to the temporary teachers' desk which had been placed up front by the elves. Handing her a sheet of paper, he said simply, "Tonight."

Both Hermione and Harry nodded their understanding and, picking up their bags, quietly made their way out of the room.

After lunch, and as they made their way down the hallway and towards third-year transfiguration, the pair held an intense, rapid-fire conversation about the contents of the parchment which the Professor had handed Hermione. On one side, it said: "My office. 7:30. Don't be late." On the back side, though, was a list of dates in 1980, all exactly 28 days apart. The heading of the parchment was the scribbled statement: "Bad days to try to reach me."

Below the dates were a series of Runes and warding-glyphs. Beside them was the short notation: "The reason that I couldn't contact you." It was cryptic, but it set Hermione's 'Need to Read' on fire and caused her to start running lists of places where she wanted to go in order to research the symbols. The first stop was her private, elf-supplied library. She and Harry had the only keys to it and she was the librarian.

By the time that they reached Minerva McGonagall's office, Harry knew the list just as well as Hermione. Since two heads were better than one, they decided to split the duty. It would require that they

spend several hours past bedtime getting the work done, but it was worth it, if they could find what they were looking for. Hermione rationalized the extra study time as 'together'-time that was good for them as a couple. "Besides", she thought to him, "we don't have to wear nearly as many clothes while inside the magical trunk."

Harry liked that idea very much.

Hermione giggled in his mind. "Boys are so easy." Harry faked a growl at 'boys' and told her, across their bond, that there had better be only one boy in her life, and that he better be the one or there would be trouble. Hermione softened at that and told him, in no uncertain terms, that yes, he was the only boy for her and that he needn't ever worry about that.

"GOOD" was Harry's only reply.

Third-year Transfiguration turned out to be a great deal easier than Hermione had expected, and therefore not quite as challenging as she had hoped. The visualization exercises that she and Harry had been doing during their summer school-work had indeed put them both in a good position. Perhaps too good, in some respects. Third-year transfiguration students had to be able to change an inanimate object into another one of roughly the same size and get the details of the target object correct as well as make inanimate objects animate, as well as do the process in reverse. Both Harry and Hermione found that they could do all of those things fairly easily already. It was largely a matter of concentration and practice. After conjuring a perfect teddy-bear out of thin air, Hermione was not feeling 'pushed' the way she liked, while Harry had so much raw power that while he missed a few minor details from time to time, he could do the transfiguration first in almost all cases.

Professor McGonagall stood at the head of the class and after reading attendance list, she passed out a copy of the class syllabus to each of the students. When it was done, she gathered the remaining copies, placed them on her desk, and then turned to address the class. "Welcome to third-year transfiguration. This class is not to be taken lightly. What we do here can have serious consequences if you make a mistake. Magical transfiguration can

easily go awry and therefore, you must all pay close and strict attention. If I catch any of you doing transfiguration on your fellow students, you will most likely be expelled from the school. There are no second-chances. It is a beautiful and wonderful art and many gifted wizards and witches have made names for themselves within wizarding society by mastering its nuances and subtleties. Now, are there any questions before we begin?"

A student stood up who looked suspiciously like a Wesley – but not one that Harry knew. Hermione guessed, over their bond, that it was either Fred or George, and she warned Harry that they were known pranksters.

The deputy Headmistress pointed to the boy and said, "Yes, Mr. Weasley? What can I do for you?"

"Ma'am, can you tell us what a pair of first-year students are doing in the class?" he said, pointing at Hermione and Harry.

McGonagall looked sympathetically at Harry and Hermione before turning her attention to the tall teen. "Yes, Mr. Weasley. They are here to demonstrate what hard work and a devotion to ones' studies can do for a student. Mr. and Mrs. Potter tested out of first and second-year transfiguration after just less than four weeks of study. I daresay that you and your brothers have never, in all of your years here at Hogwarts, ever done as well as the Potters. And if you think that I am being overly generous in my praise for them, consider this. Minutes after being told that she is a witch, and never before having even touched a wand, Hermione Potter née Granger used my wand to conjure a perfectly formed, complete accurate teddy bear. On Harry's third day of study, Harry turned Mrs. Norris into a 'cat balloon' and then restored her, as if it was nothing." She didn't mention the fact that he had done it wandlessly, because there was no point in scaring everyone. "The Potters are an exceptional couple and I would advise you and your brother that you antagonize them at your peril." She wanted to say "It's probably best that you all remember what Mr. Potter did just last night", but she didn't. There was no point in creating enmity where there was none.

No one, including Harry, could forget what Harry had done the previous night, of course. Fred and George most certainly could not. Abraham Nott had been a permanent thorn in their sides for the three years that they had been at the school and they were privately delighted to know that he was no longer a student – even if the means of his departure had been gruesome in the extreme. The twins vowed to each other then and there that they would never, ever get either Harry or Hermione mad at them. Some students just did not have the same kind of sense of humor as they did and it was just not worth it to get the Potters mad at them over a simple prank.

Transfiguration ended at 4:45 – in time for flying practice before dinner. Hermione was very unsure about the whole idea of riding on a broom, and she told a number of people, including Ginny Weasley, that she was scared of heights, in order to get out of it.

Ginny was having none of it, though, and neither was Harry. As they walked out to the Quidditch pitch, the boisterous not-quite-eleven-year-old told Hermione all about breaking into her brothers' broom shed and taking their best brooms out for joy-rides in the evening. Hermione, however, was unconvinced. She thought that the whole idea of riding on something as thin as a broom-stick several hundred feet above the ground was unnatural. "If God had meant for me to fly, he would have given me wings, Harry!" she thought to him.

"You never know, love. If we can become animagi, like Professor McGonagall said, then maybe we WILL be able to fly on our own. I'd love to do that with you!" Hermione could feel Harry's excitement and knew that in the end, she'd not be able to resist his enthusiasm.

When they reached the pitch, there was a row of brooms laid out on the ground and a stern, but not quite severe-looking, diminutive woman with gray-blue eyes and slightly curly, graying blonde hair; standing near them. She was wearing a black robe with crossed silver broomsticks etched on the front, over her heart. Beneath the robe, she wore tight-fitting silver trousers and a matching mock-turtleneck blouse. Madame Hooch was the school's flight instructor, as well as the resident official Quidditch referee. The former keeper for the Hollyhead Harpies, she had made the Pan-European Women's Quidditch all-star team five times.

Harry, Ginny, Hermione, Ron, Neville, Draco, Daphne, Luna, and three other students whom Harry didn't recognize all lined up near the brooms. Harry could feel his wife's nervousness and reached out over their bond to reassure her that everything was going to be all right.

"All right, boys and girls. Today we introduce you to flying – real flying. Not the horsing around you've been doing at home. Now, a couple of words about safety: One – falling off a broom at speed will most likely kill you. Two – banging into another flyer at speed will most likely kill you. Three – if I catch any of you fooling around on your broom or trying out maneuvers that you've not been properly trained how to do, you will never, ever fly again while at this school. That means you will have to find a private flying teacher and pay that person a great deal of money to teach you what I will teach you for free today and in the days to come. What I teach you here will keep you alive. Remember that.

Ok, first question: How many of you have flown your own broom at home?"

Draco, Daphne, Luna, Ron, and Ginny all raised their hands. "Very good. That's about what I expected. I assume the rest of you have never even seen a broom before? What about you Mr. Longbottom. Surely, you've been around a broom?"

Neville couldn't look her in the eyes. "No, Ma'am. My Gran wouldn't let me fly. Said that she didn't dare risk....." His voice trailed off and the end of his answer was lost. Madame Hooch seemed to understand and patted the young boy on the shoulder in what appeared to be a gesture of sympathy.

"Ok, that means the two of you have never been around a broom before."

Harry looked at her and without missing a beat, said "my wife and I are both muggle-raised. She's muggle-born and I lived with Muggles until I was rescued this summer."

The powerful witch had stopped hearing anything when Harry had reached the word 'wife' and stared at them both, blankly. She was at a complete loss for words for almost thirty seconds. It was a very long and uncomfortable thirty seconds. Hermione was starting to fidget when the flying instructor came back to her senses. "Young man, I assume that you and the young lady here are one of the special couples that the Headmaster spoke about?"

Hermione nodded.

Rubbing her eyes for a moment, as if to clear away the stress created by the revelation, she then sighed. "Alright, I've never taught a couple before. Is there anything special that I need to know about the two of you before we start?"

"Actually, Ma'am, we're not the only special couple. Draco and Daphne – over there" He pointed at them in a friendly way. "They're bonded too. Anything they can do, we probably can do, and the other way around as well. Luna and Ms. Weasley are also bonded, but I don't know them well at all."

Draco heard Harry's comment and snorted in quiet disbelief. He said to Daphne "Not bloody likely. He's got more magic in one toe that I have in my whole body."

Daphne was not about to take Draco's self-criticism lying down. "Really? And who did the 'Boy-who-lived' turn to when he needed to know about traps and magical evasion for his DADA class a week ago? Draco, one of these days you're going to realize how special you are. I love you...and I know I wouldn't have fallen for just any wizard. Now, stop telling yourself that you're no good. It's not true."

The older witch looked at Harry and Hermione and then over at Draco and Daphne and past them, at Ginny and Luna. "Great, so I have the three 'wonder-couples' right here in one class and no one bothered to tell me anything. Ok. I heard from Minerva that you all can talk to each other silently. Is that true?"

Both Harry and Hermione nodded. "As far as we know, yes, that's true."

Rolanda Hooch smiled a brief smile. “Well, that might be the best news so far. It will make teaching the six of you that much easier. All I have to do is tell one of you and the other will hear it. Good, then I won’t have to repeat myself.”

She backed off about ten feet, so that she was standing in front of all of them, and they in turn, were each beside his or her own broom. “What I am going to do is have you hold your hand out in mid-air, open-palm facing down, and concentrate on your broom. Look at it and think about it rising to meet your hand. When you can do that, say ‘Up!’ and the broom should rise to meet your hand. Grasp it firmly and then swing one leg over it, so you’re straddling the broom.”

They all did so and then waited. Ginny looked the most comfortable, followed by Draco, and then Daphne. Luna looked a little nervous, but hid it well. “I hope I don’t make a fool of myself” Harry thought to his love.

“Just do your best, Harry. I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

Harry hoped so too. He didn’t want to look bad in Hermione’s eyes.

An hour into the lesson, it was clear who the real flyers were. Draco was good – he couldn’t not be...but he was severely outclassed by both Ginny and Harry. Between those two, though, Harry was dominant. Ginny didn’t have the courage to do the things that Harry had begun doing naturally. Madame Hooch had lost control of the class and she knew it. She was no longer the one who was giving the commands. Ginny and Draco had learned enough that they were teaching their partners...but by so doing, taught Harry and Hermione by example. Luna was the most hesitant of the group, for reasons that were unknown to any save Ginny.

Ginny was sympathetic to her partner and did her best to encourage her and build her confidence with each new success.

At the end of the hour and a half class, Madame Hooch made the six children gather around her. She looked impressed, if a bit irritated. “All right, good job. Each of you will get your permits to fly and to

have a broom stored at the broom-shed. Open practices are on Saturday, from sunrise to sunset, and on Sunday, from 10 Am until sunset. I expect each of you to improve your skills and to continue to work on the things you've been taught here today.

Mr. Potter, Mr. Malfoy, Ms. Weasley? Would the three of you stay behind for a moment?"

Harry shook his head. "Madame Hooch, whatever you have to say, you can say in front of my wife. She's only going to hear it anyway, so just please tell me?"

Shaking her head, she looked at him "You know, that's going to take some getting used to. All right, I want to propose that you, Mr. Mal...I'm sorry...Mr. Greengrass, and Ms. Weasley all try out for the House Quidditch teams. I know that you're all first-year students, but you all certainly don't fly like first-year students and it would be a waste to make the three of you wait longer than necessary to play."

Ginny pumped her fist. She was clearly excited by the idea. Even Luna looked like she was pretty pleased. Daphne sidled up to her bond-mate and their eyes immediately glazed over in the way that told Harry that they were both engrossed in a private conversation. The only problem with the silent conversations that they were all able to have was that walking and talking over one's bond-link were almost entirely mutually exclusive. The mind could only do so many things at one time, it turned out.

Harry and Hermione had a solution of sorts for it. If they needed to talk that way, they'd find a place to stop and hide – like an empty corridor, or a cupboard – and they'd face each other, with foreheads touching, and immerse themselves in the magic of their bond. If they were apart and needed to share a thought, either would find someone or somewhere to lean on; close their eyes, and then let themselves go into the bond.

She knew that it was going to take the rest of the schools' population a while to get used to the idea that certain couples had to be left alone, even if they were acting very strangely indeed. Harry

wondered if the other first and second-year students had any idea that soon, most all of them would be able to do the same thing as well.

Taking his hand, Hermione led Harry up and away from the Quidditch pitch in silence. It was time for dinner and both were getting irritable with hunger.

Hogwarts - Monday, September 2nd, 7:25 Pm. – outside the DADA classroom

Harry and Hermione Potter, who together represented the future of House Potter, stood in the shadows near the DADA classroom. They were completely invisible, thanks to Draco's helpful teachings and their quick mastery of the disillusionment and silencing charms. With the sound of their breath masked, the two thought that they were as well camouflaged as they could be.

They were surprised, therefore, when Remus Lupin walked along the wall, near where they were hiding, and smiled as he turned to look at the spot where they were standing. "Good evening Harry, Hermione. Waiting long?" Swearing under his breath, Harry cancelled the two charms. He and Hermione pushed off the wall and followed the Professor into the classroom and towards the Professor's office.

He waived them towards two seats, which Harry and Hermione gratefully fell into. It had been a long day and the two were justifiably tired. Looking across the desk at them, Remus Lupin wondered, and not for the first, third or even tenth time, just how he could have been surprised that Harry had made it to Hogwarts. Seeing Harry – the way he moved, spoke, and looked like James – was going to take some getting used to for the old Marauder.

"Harry, seeing you this morning was a shock. I won't lie to you. I can't imagine how the time could go by so fast!"

Yawning, Harry looked at him. "Sir, I'm tired. I know that you and my father were friends, along with Professor Snape, Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew, and my mother, Lily Evans. I also know that Peter betrayed

my parents and that Sirius Black is innocent.”

Remus Lupin was suddenly sitting up very straight and was paying strict attention. “What do you mean, Peter betrayed them?”

“My parents were convinced at the last moment to switch secret keepers. At least, that’s what Professor Snape and my parents’ portraits all say. Sirius never betrayed or killed anyone. My parents’ portraits also told me to use whatever I have to out of my vault to get Sirius free. Right now, that’s a lot of galleons.”

“More than a million? Because that’s what it might take.”

Hermione giggled. “Try a hundred and forty nine million, sir”

Lupin’s jaw fell open so fast; Harry thought it might hit the desk. He knew, in a round-about way, that James was well off. He never, ever thought – not in a million years – that James had that much money. It was more than enough to do what they had to do. “That will do, Harry. We have to start by contacting some help in the solicitor community. There’s one particular lawyer who’s really, really good - Nicholas Sharpstar. He’s in Diagon Alley. He’s a real shark and he has no tolerance at all for the ‘purebloods’ and their agenda. I think he’d help you, even if you didn’t pay him. Paying him up front and without question will make him work just that much harder. It won’t buy his loyalty – that will have to come from the two of you – but it will buy his time.”

Harry took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes for a moment. Hermione could feel how tired Harry was and knew that the sooner she got him to bed, the better the two of them would be.

“Sir, I am so tired that I’m having difficulty focusing. Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, Harry. What is that you want to know?”

“How did you find us this evening? We should have been all but undetectable.”

Lupin smiled and then ran a hand through his own, wiry hair; trying somewhat in vain to get it to sweep back and down. When he was finished, he looked at the two. "How do you think I did it?"

Hermione started to bounce up and down in her seat and Harry smiled inwardly. "You were able to smell us, because you're a werewolf."

"Ten points to Ravenclaw then, Hermione. Right in one. What gave it away?"

Hermione didn't answer immediately. Instead, she reached into her bag and pulled out her day-planner. Holding it up, she turned the book around so one particular page was facing the professor: The yearly lunar calendar.

"Huzzah, Hermione. Very good use of your Muggle background. Did you understand what a full moon means immediately?"

Hermione nodded. "We covered that in one of the three-hour DADA sessions early on with the Headmaster. He was most insistent that we know every one of the major 'dark' animals that we are likely to encounter in England and Werewolves were one of them. The other hint was just overkill."

"Again, very well done. The second part I included partially to see how far along you both are. Did you recognize the symbols?"

"They were glyphs of protection. One of them though was a weird two-part one that I couldn't quite puzzle out. Something about the moon...." Harry said...then a dawning look of realization struck his face. "It was a glyph of protection against Werewolves, right?"

"Excellent Harry! Very well reasoned. Now you know why I couldn't visit you. The damn glyphs kept me away. They are might just as well have been covered in silver. I couldn't go within a two-block radius of your relatives' home. It was Dumbledore's way of keeping you safe against Fenrir Grayback and his pack. He was the one who attacked me when I was a young boy and he's always been one of

Voldemort's favorite soldiers. Now, I must ask you both to swear a wizard's oath that you will not repeat that. If it became common knowledge, I'd no longer be able to teach here and the Headmaster needs me. Besides, having me here allows me to help you both and to protect you."

Harry and Hermione were both more than willing to give him their oaths and did so immediately. Once it was out of the way, he looked at them. "Seeing you both in my third year course was a bit of a shock today, I won't mind admitting. The Headmaster told me not to react to anything that might happen in this first week, but he didn't elaborate. Now I know what he was talking about."

It was like the Headmaster, Harry had found. Albus Dumbledore was cryptic at the best of times and there were other times when the things he said bordered on the down right ridiculous, if they were taken at face-value. "Are there any other things that I should know about you, Harry? Any surprises that you've not told me about?"

"Harry bonded with a wyvern, Professor, over the summer."

Remus Lupin had to swallow hard several times to suppress his desire to leap across the desk and beat some sense into the boy. "Say that again, so that I'm sure that I have a reason to beat you senseless, Harry."

Their eyes met and Harry summoned some of the power that Dumbledore was slowly showing him how to use. "I bonded with a wyvern this summer, sir. She's beautiful and her name is Amrita."

"Harry, I can't tell you how impossibly stupid that was to do. Not only are wyverns a type of Dragon, but they're notoriously difficult to manage."

"Would it help if I told you that I can talk to them and that Amrita became a part of my bonding with Hermione?"

Several realities which included killing himself swam before his eyes before he was able to gather himself sufficiently to keep his inner wolf from reaching out and throttling Harry. "You can do what?"

“Johan said that I’m a parselmouth and that was the reason that I was able to talk to Amrita. When I told him about talking to snakes at the zoo, he told me what it meant and said that I should keep quiet about being able to do it because some people associate it with dark wizards. Hermione can do it now, too, because of our bond.”

Figuring that he was getting too old to deal with the kinds of shocks that he had just been handed, Remus Lupin said, “Before you give me any more reasons to doubt the health of my heart, Harry, tell me this. When you said that your wyvern was part of your bonding, what did you mean?”

Harry told him about first meeting Hermione and about the fact that Amrita had been on his shoulders at the time and the fact that the beautiful creature could talk to both of them anytime. Lupin shook his head and thought about what Lily and James might have said about it all. Then he remembered that Harry had mentioned talking to their portraits. “Harry? Have you told your parents’ portraits about what’s happened? Do they know about your abilities? Did they say anything about Amrita?”

By the time Harry, Hermione, and Professor Lupin had finished talking, another hour had gone by and only fifteen minutes remained before curfew. They gathered their things and practically ran out of the office and up the four flights of stairs which separated the DADA office from the upper, residential floors. They made it to their tower with just a few minutes to spare and made their way, as quickly as possible, to their own suite and the hot tub which waited therein. They were exhausted and were grateful beyond words to finally crawl into bed a few minutes before 10 Pm.

Hermione’s last thought, before sleep claimed her, was that if every day was as tiring, she wouldn’t last the week.

In the next chapter, we’ll see how the bonding ceremony goes....stay tuned. Please read and review! Thanks

Chapter Five – “Partner for the Dance”

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Disclaimer: I do not own any of the Harry Potter characters. All characters are creations of Joanne K Rowling, © 2007, to whom I am deeply indebted. I make no money from any of this.

Note one – In regards to the contents on page (9) of this story, see:

[content\(dot\)herbalgram\(dot\)?a=2288&p=Y](#) about the plant-life in Baja, Mexico.

Note two – the Hindu prayer found on page 36 can be found at

[1stholistic\(dot\)com/spl_prayers/A2004/prayer_](#)

I claim nothing regarding it's accuracy or authenticity, as I am generally unfamiliar with the practices of Hinduism. If anyone has a comment or a better source of information, I hope you will send it to me.

From Chapter Four: “What is Real?”

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Hogwarts - Friday, September 6th – 8:15 Am – Care of Magical Creatures

Cold rains had come early to southern Scotland and the highland grass was wet as Harry and his classmates walked across the field which lay between the Castle and Rubeus Hagrid’s home. Like most of the other students, he was getting wet as each hillock of grass shed its share of water against his cloak. Boots were getting soaked too and there was a general discontent caused by the chill in the air and the early hour.

As the students trudged onwards, their breaths made grey, wispy clouds and there was little, if any, discussion. No one wanted to be there. Not because Hagrid wasn’t beloved, but because it was just too damn early for their liking. Some had been late to breakfast and had been forced to do with just a bit of toast and a half-swallow of tea before making their way towards Hagrid’s hut. Others, like Ron Weasley, had consumed as much breakfast as his belly would allow, and then some; making continued consciousness problematic.

The gray basalt rock which formed the mountains all around the Castle looked like muddy pillows against the dark green and brown background and Harry almost tripped on such an outcropping as he followed the meandering train of students. Hermione had begged off the mornings' class, complaining about increasing cramps and a headache. Harry knew he wasn't going to be able to stay for the entire class and had already asked Draco and Daphne to get any class notes that he might miss. He felt bad about not being able to stay, but not bad enough to force himself to be away from Hermione for that long. They had tried to be apart for forty-five minutes and it had made both of them physically sick. Given the onset of Hermione's period, Harry wasn't going to add that to her troubles, or his own.

As the group approached Hagrid's home, they smelled something amazing. For a moment, Harry thought that Hermione was nearby, because it smelled of cinnamon, orange, and something indefinable. Others were looking around too. Daphne had a slightly dazed, but happy look as she took in the scent. Draco looked happy, too, and it was obvious that whatever space he was in, he shared it with her. Harry wondered for a moment if Draco had known, before, the kind of happiness that his face showed.

The door of the hut opened a moment later and out stepped Rubeus Hagrid. He was an enormous man – easily nine and a half or ten feet tall – and walked as though there was not a single thing in the world that bothered him.

“G'morning! I'm Rubeus Hagrid; Keeper of Keys and grounds here and I'm your Care of Magical Creatures professor. I'm going to call the roll and then I want you to stand off to the side. We'll be taking a short walk into the forest this morning – and yes, you will all be safe. Nothing'll bother you all when you're with me.”

Harry wondered what they might be going to see. George and Fred Weasley had spent part of breakfast filling their heads with tales of woe and large spiders. Ron's reaction to their stories was immediate, obvious discomfort – and fear, if Harry guessed right.

Ron was a decidedly odd duck, Harry thought. His table-manners were much like Harry's (deceased) cousin Dudley's had been, and yet the boy was almost prissy in other ways. There was something about the boy's voice, too, that set him apart from the others and for the life of him, Harry couldn't quite place it. Fred and George saw it, he could tell, and they were taking the mickey out of him for it. It didn't seem as though they had much patience for it, either. Whatever it was that made Ron different, it was enough to set their teeth on edge.

Percy Weasley was the other really odd one. He was the fifth-year prefect of Gryffindor house, but hearing Ron talk about it, Harry thought that Ron firmly believed that Percy should have been sorted to Slytherin instead. Harry was uncertain what to think. He did not like what he had seen of Percy thus far, but was willing to cut him a break until he had learned more about the older boy.

Looking around, Harry saw that Draco and Daphne, as well as Luna and Ginny, were all taking advantage of their bonds to stay close to each other and share cloaks. It was one benefit of the travelling cloaks that he had noticed immediately: they were way too big for one student...but were ideal for two. Layering them, one over the other, was the best recipe for keeping warm in the mornings' chilled air. He wished that Hermione was with him.

"Love? 'Mione? Are you all right?"

When she didn't immediately reply, Harry began to worry. It wasn't like her not to respond. He tried again to reach her and this time, succeeded.

"You there, love?"

"I'm here, Harry. Feel like shit, but I'm here. How long are you going to be?"

"Ten minutes, tops, love. Long enough to find out what Hagrid wants to show us and then I'll be straight back."

Hermione didn't reply, but he could feel her calming down immediately at his reassurance. "Can you stop by and tell Madame

Pomfrey that I need some of her potion? She'll know the one. Two vials, if you can get them. Oh, and tell her thank you for the pads."

"Will do, love. See you soon" As she closed their link, Hermione pushed at him feelings of love and appreciation for what he was willing to do for her. Harry was too young to fully appreciate why she'd feel so strongly about it, but was glad that he could do something nice for her when she was hurting.

Harry remembered that he hadn't taken his nutrient/growth potion yet and started to dig into his bag for it when his name was called. "Yes, present" he said absentmindedly. When Hermione's name was called, Harry looked up. He hadn't expected to hear her called "Hermione Granger", as all of the professors had been calling her by her married name all throughout August. Harry put his bag down and walked over to the huge man. "Professor Hagrid, sir? Hermione's last name is Potter. She's not here right now because she's feeling sick. I'm going to get notes for her."

A smile crossed the giant man's face as he said "Potter, eh? Right then, I'll just be changing that on the roll. You be telling her that I expect to see her in class on Monday, ok?"

"I will, sir. Thank you."

"Don't be thanking me quite yet, Harry. I've a surprise for all of you." Hagrid reached over and rang the bell that hung just outside his doorway; effectively silencing the quiet conversations which were happening amongst the group. "Now, huddle up, all of yah. I've a surprise for you in the forest and we're going to go quietly, in a single line, down to where they are. I'll be having no yelling or there'll be detentions all around, understood?"

Heads nodded up and down and the group more or less formed a line behind the bearded man as he stepped down from the porch in front of his hut and walked quickly down into the forest. Several of the smaller students towards the back of the group, including Harry, were forced into an almost double-time pace because of his long strides.

Five minutes later – which seemed like fifteen to Harry – they arrived at a large, roughly-hewn paddock and in the middle of the paddock stood the most beautiful creature Harry had ever seen: A perfect, white, female unicorn. Her eyes were an opalescent blue-black and her horn – completely white. It looked like it had been carved by God himself into perfect, concentric rings, each a little smaller than the next, until it terminated in a tiny white cone at the tip. The unicorn's tail was a yard and a half long, Harry guessed, and had been tied at the base with a golden bow.

What Harry knew about unicorns could fill no more than a thimble, but he was sure that was about to change.

Ten minutes later, after he had been given the chance to touch the beautiful animal, Harry made his apologies to the professor and made a bee-line back to the castle and to his wife.

It was a good thing that the hospital wing was one the way to their dorm, Harry thought, or he would have had to do the trip at something close to a run. Even after he had barged into the medical wing; accidentally slamming the door open and almost knocking over one of the medical carts in the long hallway with his swinging schoolbag, Madame Pomfrey was very accommodating about Hermione's potion – which reminded Harry yet again to dig into his own bag and finally take the potion which Johan had instructed him to take with breakfast.

Harry thanked her for the pads, just as Hermione had instructed, and then made a dash for the seventh floor and their private suite of rooms. He had been away from her for thirty-five minutes and he was starting to feel seriously sick. Not ill to the point of incapacitation, but ill almost to the point of nausea.

Two minutes later, he was up the stairs and into their private bedroom. Hermione was lying on her side, massaging her stomach, and trying to keep from throwing up. The moment he touched her, the nausea that they both felt started to recede and she turned onto her back; smiling at him as he leaned down to kiss her.

“Hi” she thought to his as their lips met.

“Hey, you. Missed me?” he thought back, as their kiss intensified.

“Always, Harry. I love you.”

Harry eased himself down onto the bed, next to her, and handed her one of the vials of pain reliever that Madame Pomfrey always kept on hand for the female half of the school. “Love you, too, ‘Mione. Do you always feel like this during.....?”

Hermione flipped the rubber stopper off the vial and immediately drank down the contents; licking her lips when it was finished. She capped the empty vial and then banished it across the room with a wave of her hand – right into the rubbish bin.

Amused, Harry grinned at her. “Should have played basket-ball, love. That was a nice shot.”

“I’ll stick to tennis, thank you very much. And yes, this is what it feels like every month. Just wait until my period actually hits. The cramps are just the preview.”

Harry groaned. He was already sharing the internal discomfort that Hermione so aptly called ‘the squirms’ and so was not looking forward to experiencing anything worse.

“Be grateful that you’re not the one who ends up bleeding for five days.”

The thought of that made Harry grateful indeed. Having his bits bleeding constantly for five days was gross. “Gross or not, Harry, it’s what makes me the girl you love. It comes with the territory, so get used to it.”

Hermione’s tone was smug, but not nastily so. Harry rolled over on his side and looked at her; sweeping a lock of hair away from her face, as he contemplated what she had said. “I love you, Hermione. I’ll do anything for you. I just.....”

“I know, Harry. You’ve never been told anything. We should go see Madame Pomfrey. She can teach you everything you want to know

about girls and all our 'plumbing' and stuff. You know I have a book, too, if you didn't want to talk to her first."

Harry blushed, in spite of himself, and then nodded. "That might be easier, I think. Even though you can show me everything you think I need to know, I can go through the book and figure out what I don't know and then we can talk some more about it."

Instead of going and getting the book immediately, the two snuggled next to each other, while Hermione waited for the pain medicine to work. She hoped that she'd be able to move by the time Care for Magical Creatures ended, so that they'd be able to get to their next class without being late. Johan was fair and patient with them, but she saw no sense in pushing any limits with him unnecessarily.

Headmaster's Office – 8:55 Am. – Friday, Sept. 6th.

"Headmaster? Are you sure that it is wise to hold her like this?"

Johan Snape was pacing back and forth in the Headmaster's outer office. A one-foot high, 24" by 36" terrarium was on the table in front of the Headmaster's desk and a small, ugly beetle was standing on an over-large leaf in one corner; glaring at them.

"Johan, yes, I'm sure. We've gotten all we could out of Ms. Skeeter using the Veritiserum, but now she knows too much about us and I am afraid that if we used the kind of memory charm that you are suggesting, we would be doing more harm than good. If we hang on to her, in her current form, we can let her go once Tom is dead and gone and she'll be able to do no more harm to Harry and Hermione. She's already thrown the Kneazle in among the pixies, as Mrs. Figg likes to say, and now we have to do a considerable amount of damage control, just to get back to where we were before her article."

"Why not just kill her and be done with it? It's not like she's going to be missed. If anyone asks, we tell them that she was probably eaten by one of the owls."

'Albus' smiled grimly. "Johan – remember what I've always said about choosing the right over the easy. Yes, it would be easier to just kill

her. It wouldn't, however, be right. At least, not right now. I know she's a threat to us and to our plans, and that she'd happily serve Tom or his minions, if the price was right, but we have other problems right now."

Johan knew the Headmaster was right. There were the issues of Harry's familiar – Amrita – that was growing every day and the issue of what to do about Rita's 'inside source', Mr. Filch. It was an unfortunate reality that squibs like Mr. Filch did not have enough magic in them to perform certain, necessary loyalty oaths, and that without those oaths; he constituted a breach in the school's security arrangements.

Rita Skeeter had exploited that breach and had compromised the school's safety, and the safety of the students, by publishing information that was not for public consumption. Once 'Albus' had gotten a look inside the man's mind, was more than happy to deal with the caretaker. Sadistic, abusive pedophiles had no business being around children, in any circumstance and as such, Mr. Filch was destined for the next great adventure, or despair, depending on the purity of the condemned individual's soul.

Johan looked at his longtime friend and grimaced. "I think it would be better if I did it, Albus. Your list is long enough, I think. Just as well that you didn't carry this burden."

"If you only knew, my friend. If you only knew."

"Thank you, Johan. I was not looking forward to the duty. Argus should have been made to leave a long time ago and I think I let him overstay his welcome. I'm sorry that it has come to this."

Johan looked at the man whom he had known since he was eleven. "I will not despair of this duty, Headmaster. I saw the way he manhandled those 6th year girls last spring. Just as well to be done with him."

'Albus' turned away for a moment, contemplating the next difficult duty that might come his way, before turning back to face the potions-master. "Very well, Johan. Painlessly, if you can do it."

The black-haired, black-caped man looked at his mentor and then nodded solemnly, before turning and striding out of the office and down the stairs, towards the caretaker's office.

The news of Mr. Filch's sudden disappearance hit during lunch and caught most all of the students by surprise. It was Peeves, the resident poltergeist, who bobbed into the Great Hall and cackled all about.

"Filch-y is gone; Filch-y gone!

Wee bitsy bad man,

Filch-y is gone!"

The ones who took in the news with the greatest glee were the Weasley Twins. They shared high-fives with their comrades up and down the long table, before being angrily set-upon by the Deputy-Headmistress. "BOYS!! SIT! DOWN! NOW! TEN POINTS FROM GRYFFINDOR!! I WILL NOT HAVE YOU CELEBRATING MR. FILCH'S DISAPPEARANCE IN SUCH A MANNER!"

The Headmistresses' wand was out and pointing towards the unruly redheads; who immediately sat down and looked very, very contrite and apologetic. It was one thing, they thought, to annoy the 'slimy, greasy git', Prof. Snape, but it was quite another to irritate their own Head-of-House. She was not above using transfiguration as a means of punishment and had done so once already to each of the twins, even if the Headmaster 'officially' frowned on the practice,

With a silent flick of the Headmistresses' wrist, Peeves found himself enclosed in an inescapable, plastic bubble that the students were then allowed to bat around the Great Hall as they ate lunch. 'Albus' watched as Peeves struggled, helplessly, to escape the confinement and smiled at his life-long friend and lover. It was a relatively harmless way, the Headmaster thought, for the students to 'blow off some steam' and, more importantly, a very effective way of taking the school's collective mind off the disappearance of the caretaker.

Staff Meeting Room at Hogwarts; 4:30 Pm. Friday, Sept. 6th

Sixteen of the seventeen full-time teachers that constituted the main teaching faculty at Hogwarts assembled in the plush, comfortable staff room, just off the main stairway on the third floor.

It was Friday afternoon and the first week's classes had just concluded for the day and to a person, they were all grateful that the week was over. Only one more duty remained before the long weekend and it was the main subject of debate as the august group waited for the Headmaster to arrive.

Johan Severus Snape sat back in his favorite, brown-leather recliner near the fireplace, sipping from a heavy, cut-glass snifter that was filled with pale golden liquor: Tequila Añejo y Reposado. It was a drink not unlike Firewhiskey in some ways, but with considerably more body and subtlety. The particular bottle through which he was slowly drinking his way had been given to him by a particularly powerful and knowledgeable potions-mistress whom he had come across one hot afternoon in a mountain valley north and east of San Carlo, Mexico, in the southern part of the Baja Peninsula the summer before he met Elizabeth. He had been looking for the Mexican Sling-tooth snake, which got its name from the two-inch long fangs which it kept folded flat against the roof of its mouth (that it would 'sling forward' like a folded stiletto knife just before biting) so that he could collect both its venom and a shed skin. He got lucky and stumbled upon a freshly hatched nest of Sling-tooth's in the warm sands beneath an Elephant Tree (*Pachycormus discolor*) that were being guarded by a particularly fearsome 4 meter-long mama sling-tooth. While he was milking the mother for her venom, a tall, lithesome woman in her mid- to late-50's came up the trail and into the small clearing where he was standing. He had been unsure of her intentions at first, because she refused to put her wand away; even after he had assured her of his peaceful intent.

It served him right, he thought, that the daddy sling-tooth's bite just missed his leg; forcing him to jump towards the woman and away from the five-meter long, angry snake.

“Could’a died that day”, he knew. The woman stunned the snake and smiled smugly at him as she walked over with her own collecting kit and began milking the daddy-snake. It yielded, to Snape’s chagrin, fully a third more venom than had its mate.

“You should have done your research” she had said to him, after her task was done. “They always raise their young together”.

“You...you saved my life. Thank you.”

“You’re not from around here, not by a long-shot, and the local MLEO’s would look askance if I let you die out here” she said, smiling at him in an almost ‘come-hither’ kind of way.

Snape reclined his head and thought about all that he had learned in the two weeks that had followed that fateful encounter. Not only did he get all the skin that he could ever use, but he had also learned a great deal about Mexican and South American magical practices and potions. Plus, he had been introduced to the local ‘brew’ - 100% Agave tequila. That, in combination with the best food he had had for years, convinced him to part with a few of his most closely guarded potions recipes and secrets.

Señorita Doñetta Sanchez Orozco became a very, very good friend, and lover, he thought wistfully, and at the end, Johan Severus Snape found himself loathe to leave her company.

At five minutes before five, a flash of Phoenix fire announced the arrival of the Headmaster. Gone were his usually gaudy robes; replaced by dark brown work-robes that were covered with soot. The smell of ash hung heavily about him. His eyes were tired-looking and Minerva could tell, immediately, that he had spent the afternoon doing something most unpleasant.

When several of the young staff started to speak, he raised his hand, as if to pause them. “I have just come from cleaning out Mr. Filch’s apartment and office. On my orders, Professor Snape killed Argus this afternoon. After he was done, I burned the body to ash and

spread the remains in Hagrid's pumpkin patch. It is my hope that in death, Mr. Filch can serve some useful purpose."

There was a collective gasp at the Headmaster's admission that he had ordered the caretaker's death and the chattering began almost immediately. When he grew tired of it, 'Albus' raised his hand once more and signaled for them to cease. "I ordered Mr. Filch's death because he had made some frightening comments one night a month ago, while drinking at the Hogs Head Inn, to someone I trust and it led to questions. I questioned him two days ago and during that session, I used legilimency to determine whether he was telling the truth or not. One question led to another and I soon discovered that he was both a pedophile and a sadist of the worst sort. I found today, hidden among his belongings, death-eater garb and instruments of the most unspeakable kinds of torture that he planned to use on students this year. We are well to be shut of such a person. If you have a problem with my actions, speak now, or forever hold your peace. After this day, I will tolerate no dissension on the matter." Everyone could tell he was dead-serious.

He waited. And waited.

When two minutes had passed, the Headmaster looked at the collected teaching staff; meeting each eye-to-eye. After challenging each one and finding not one who sought to confront him for his action, he spoke again. "This matter is now closed. After this day, any challenge on the subject will be met with immediate dismissal and memory modification. Do I make myself understood?"

There was a quiet chorus of 'yes, sir' and the matter was closed.

"Good then. Now, let us proceed to a much happier subject. Tonight, we will perform the lunctus Animus ritual for the first and second-year students, as well as for any third-year students who knowingly and voluntarily undergo the ritual. All of you have learned the incantations, I presume?" He looked around and there were nodding heads everywhere.

"Excellent. It is my intent to perform the ritual after dinner, when the students are the most docile. I will move all of the tables back and

against the wall, so that we can form a circle in the center. I will ask the students to form several interlocking circles in the middle. They will hold hands, as the physical contact is necessary in order for the ritual to work. Once we've completed the casting of the ritual, the students will, hopefully, find someone in the group with whom to bond. Do not be surprised or alarmed at anything that happens in the circle. This is very, very old magic."

I must stress that we cannot let go of each other until every student has found his or her bond-mate. If the circle drops, for any reason, the magic will be lost and we will have to begin again. I do not expect to see any of you again before classes resume next week."

Minerva McGonagall met her partners' gaze as his eyes swept the room. "Albus?" she said, "What about the other bonded couples? What are they to do tonight?"

"I will dismiss them immediately after dinner, with a note releasing them on their own recognizance for the weekend. Ms. Lovegood-Weasley has already approached me about her desire to return to her father's home with Ginny for the weekend and I told her that they can leave from my floo in the morning."

Minerva thought that it was a good plan and that Harry, Hermione, Draco, and Daphne would be pleased. The morning's mail had included a flyer from a new diner in Hogsmeade called "Philly's" and she thought from the looks of it, that it might be a great place for the two couples.

She had no idea what commotion the new diner would cause.

Hogwarts' Great Hall; 6:15 Pm. Friday, Sept. 6th.

The students filed into the Great Hall in groups of two, three, and sometimes four; eventually filling the long tables. There were more than seven hundred students in the school and they crammed the tables to capacity.

Since snacks were virtually unknown in the school; save the occasional bag of crisps or chocolate smuggled in by an enterprising student, every single one of the students was hungry and ready to lick the platters clean, if necessary.

Dumbledore rose and walked to the central podium. "Good evening, all. There is much to be said, but now is not the time. I leave you with these four words: Nitwit, oddment, blubber, and tweak. Thank you."

A dozen people down from where Harry and Hermione sat, Ron Weasley could be heard cracking up and making fun of the decidedly odd statement by the Headmaster. His brothers were trying to get him to shut up, but it appeared to be a losing battle. Ron was simply an insensitive, prissy prat.

Whatever Ron's complaints were though, they stopped the moment that the tables became magically laden with food. Roast chicken wings with Rosemary; succulent lamb-tips with mint jelly; New England steamed clams, and ever manner of side-dish all but brought talk to a halt as students and teachers alike tucked into the amazing food.

Hermione looked around and realized that she actually had an appetite – something that was unusual during the run-up to her period. Side by side, she and Harry traded tastes; often feeding the other from a shared utensil. They were being watched – subtly and not-so-subtly, but it didn't phase them. Draco and Daphne were sitting to their left, and Ginny and Luna were to their right; forming a block of students who understood and appreciated what the others were experiencing. It didn't occur to them that they were going against tradition and offending a significant number of students by sitting together.

Finally, Percy Weasley could stand it no longer and made his way over to where the bonded were sitting. Harry didn't see him coming, as he was immersed in a silent conversation with Hermione, but his magical sense alerted him to the prefect's presence immediately. Snape watched with his wand at the ready, as the redheaded prefect roughly tapped Harry on the shoulder.

“Potter, you and Ms. Granger aren’t supposed to be sitting here. This table is for Gryffindors only. You have to move.”

His tone was imperious and carried a ‘holier-than-thou’ attitude with it. Fortunately, Harry knew how to deal with bullies. Turning, Harry gently moved Hermione aside so that he could clear one leg up and over the bench upon which he and Hermione had been sitting a moment before. Once he was able to stand up straight, he looked the Fifth-year student in the eye. Smiling, Harry looked at Draco, then Daphne, and then at his beloved. They all sensed what was coming and hoped that Harry would leave some part of the annoying prefect intact, as a show of good sportsmanship. “First, you will address me by my title. I am Lord Harold James Potter. This beautiful young woman next to me is my wife, the Lady Potter. If you forget my title or hers again, you will regret it. Secondly, if you lay a hand on me again, you will regret it. Third, and you better remember this, you have no power to make me move. Now go away.”

The supercilious prefect sputtered and gibbered for a moment; trying to figure out what to do about Harry’s defiance. After a moment; once he realized that the Hall had gone silent and that every eye was upon him, he tried to bring himself up to what he thought was his best, most imposing height (which was more than eight inches taller than Harry). Grabbing for his wand, he started to point it at Harry in a show of threat. It made it all the way to waist-level when it suddenly burst into flames and he was forced to drop it.

From where he sat, Johan Severus Snape knew that he had just seen Harry’s first public use of totally wandless, offensive magic.

By the time the Headmistress reached the spot where Harry and Hermione were once again seated, Percy’s wand was completely destroyed – burnt to ash on the ground near the spot where Harry’s left foot had been.

The cheers for Harry’s actions died aborning; cut down by Minerva McGonagall’s presence.

Over Harry’s shoulder she said loudly, “Five points from Ravenclaw for the destruction of a fine, Ollivander-crafted wand, Lord Potter, and

shame on you.” Pausing, she added, “Ten points TO Ravenclaw, from me and Professor Snape, for your self-control and skillful use of wandless magic.” She said the last bit very quietly, in the hope that only the bonded would hear it.

Harry looked up at his mentor as Professor McGonagall strolled back up to the head table. Johan lifted his cup ever so slightly, in salute, and Harry smiled and returned the gesture with his own glass. As he turned his attention back to his almost-empty plate, notes of every shape and style began appearing in and around his and Hermione’s water-goblets. There were smiling faces up and down the Gryffindor table, and at other tables as well, congratulating Harry for putting Percy in his place. The notes – more than thirty of them – said much the same. Harry was surprised to read several compliments from students at the Slytherin table. Those he carefully and quickly replied to, with modest, but grateful thanks for their encouragement. The support of his fellow ‘Claws would come later, in more private, face-to-face meetings in their shared common room.

Hermione was supportive, as she always was, for him, and told him across their bond that she loved his protectiveness and appreciated the fact that he always sought to shelter her from things.

Draco leaned over even and said in a half-whisper, “Nice, Harry. That fucking prat has been getting on my nerves all week. Took points because I was holding hands with Daphne the other day.”

“Should have nugged him, Draco” Harry said, almost casually. Daphne’s mouth fell open at Harry’s reaction and then began to snicker at the uncharacteristically blunt comment.

“Well, I was going to, but Daphne held me back” the no-longer-quite-so-blond boy said sheepishly.

Harry leaned in close and said, “Too bad. The ponce is obviously not using them.”

Draco chuckled. The Harry Potter whom he had come to know was nothing like how he had been made out by all of his father’s friends and he was beginning to realize that he really enjoyed knowing the

young man. The dawning realization was compounded by the fact that Harry really seemed to like him as well – and for the first time, Draco thought that things might just work out for him after all.

Twenty five feet away sat the only person, besides Percy, who was fuming over the incident: Ron Weasley. Harry couldn't see the red-headed boy, because of the number of students which separated them along the bench, but his angry tone was unmistakable. Part of him wondered what the boy's real issue was, but it was drowned out by the other parts which were pleased that no real confrontation had happened with Percy. Harry knew that his mentor would have been very angry with him if the situation had escalated at all and given all that Snape had done for him, he was the last person in the world, other than Hermione, whom he wanted to annoy.

As the last of the dinner and desert plates were cleared away, the Headmaster stood and walked once again to the podium. Heads turned and a reasonable quiet came over the Hall. A more groomed, less wild-looking Dumbledore paused for a moment, before addressing the throng. His beard – which usually reached all the way down to his waistline – was trimmed short and neat. He was wearing a dark blue, heavy-weight Alpaca fleece dress robe; unadorned save for the silver ribbon and gold, pentagonal medal which hung about his neck. There were some gasps from those who were closest to the podium, as individuals recognized it. It was the ribbon and medal which signified Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore as a recipient of the Order of Merlin, First Class.

As he began to speak, the woman who had called herself Minerva McGonagall for over a hundred years, laughed inwardly as she wondered, and not for the first time, what the reaction would be if the students learned that the man who stood before them was not, in fact, Albus Dumbledore, but rather Merlin himself. Only two people had figured out on their own, who 'Dumbledore' really was since she had known him. One was Gellert Grindelwald and the other was James Harold Potter. She wondered idly if Harry would figure it out as well. She hoped, for the boy's sake, and for her own, that he didn't. It would needlessly complicate their relationship and make Dumbledore's eventual 'demise' more difficult to accomplish.

While the Headmaster was speaking, small, winged note suddenly appeared in front of Harry and Hermione. Its presence was announced by a dramatic, if multi-colorful fiery flare. The moment that the display stopped, Hermione reached out and took the note in hand; unfolding it as she did so.

“Harry,

You, Hermione, and the other bonded are dismissed for the evening. You are also released for the weekend and have my permission to visit Hogsmeade Village at your discretion. If you choose to do so, I ask that you stay together, for your own safety and that you all remember that Curfew is 11 pm. tonight and tomorrow night and 9 Pm on Sunday. If you choose not to return to the Castle tonight, please let me know where you are staying. I'd recommend The Inn where Draco and Daphne stayed over the summer.

Do NOT forget to check in with me before curfew. I will dock points and restrict your weekends from now on if you don't.

Take care and have fun.

Johan”

Hermione passed the note around excitedly and the six gathered their things quickly and made their way out of the hall; happy to be free for the weekend.

Once the bonded had made their way out of the Great Hall, the fourth through seventh-year students rose and joined them. They were looking forward to the first Hogsmeade weekend as well and were anticipating not having to be back to the Castle until Sunday night. Those who didn't have personal portkeys or didn't like traveling that way, planned to leave via floo from the Great Hall the next morning. Those who did have portkeys simply gathered their weekend travel bags and made their way out of the Castle and down the main drive, to where the school's wards stopped, so that they could activate their portkeys and go home.

Out of the four hundred or so students forth- through seventh-year students, only a hundred or so opted to stay in Hogsmeade or at the Castle for the weekend.

Ginny and Luna, who had never been to Hogsmeade before, were particularly excited to go. Thinking that it was a great chance to have some fun with the vast piles of money for which he had no particular use, Harry gathered the bonded together and told them that the weekends' activities were going to be his treat. When Hermione started to say something in protest, Harry flashed her a private thought about the ridiculous balance that was accumulating in their main vault at Gringotts and a plea for her to be understanding of his desire to have some fun.

When she relented, Harry gathered her in his arms and kissed her soundly. "I love you, Hermione. Thank you for understanding. This is going to be fun."

With that, the matter was decided and the group moved to get packed and get out of the Castle, before anything could occur which would hold them back and ruin the weekend.

The three hundred or so students and the seventeen professors were all that remained in the Great Hall. They were standing in the aisles, between the tables, as they had been instructed to do, and were waiting to be told what was going to happen next.

With a wave of his hand, the Headmaster made all of the tables fold in upon themselves and form a single line, along the western wall. Once that was complete, the schools' professors rose from their seats and moved down and off the dais and then out into the Hall itself. The ten assistant professors moved into place as well. Once they were all arranged, the Headmaster again signaled for silence.

"I am sure that you are all wondering what you are doing here and why you have not been sent up to the dorms already. Well, tonight is a very special night and we, the professors and I, will be performing a ritual that was last performed here more than seventy-four years ago.

All of you come from parents who love you and care for your happiness. There can never been 'enough' love in the world, a wise man once said. Another joined him and said it more profoundly: That we should love our neighbors as ourselves. That was a remarkable thing to have said and it is still true today. Perhaps even more so."

Myrddin looked around and saw both fear and excitement on the faces of the students around him. Some were clearly excited about the prospect of seeing ritual magic performed, while others were afraid that they might not be 'good enough' to do whatever was required of them. Sad, he thought.

"Now, what the professors and I are going to perform is called the lunctus Animus ritual. It is literally a 'soul-bonding' ritual. In this case, the magic is intended to show you the person who best matches your magic and who will most complete you as a person. When you touch that person, one of two things will happen. Either you will feel the connection and want to bond with that person, or you won't. The outcome is by no means certain. However, once inside the circle, and having been part of the ritual, if there is a match, you must make the attempt! I cannot stress this strongly enough. If you do not, the consequences can be severe – both for yourself and for the other person.

Now, some of you know that one of your fellow students already has a bond. That person is Harry Potter."

The collective gasp told Myrddin all he needed to know about the credulity with which Rita Skeeter's writings were viewed. "Yes, Rita was right, for once. Harry Potter is soul-bound to Hermione Potter née Granger. Some of you heard the confrontation between one of the prefects and Lord Potter earlier this evening and I know that not all of you chose to believe what you heard, but it is true. Harry and Hermione met earlier this summer, after searching for each other their whole lives, and their bond formed with their very first touch. Theirs is a special and perhaps even unique kind of relationship and not one that can be duplicated."

Chatter sprang up among some of the students, especially some of the younger girls, and the Headmistress performed her patented 'glare of death'; bringing the talking to an abrupt end.

"When I give the word, the professors will form a ring around all of the first and second-year students. Only third-year students who voluntarily and willingly participate may join in. We will begin the incantation and repeat it seven times. When it is complete, a gold ring will form on the floor around those who have been enchanted. NO ONE may cross that line until the ritual is complete and everyone has found a mate."

A hand shot up across from where the Headmaster stood. Myrddin turned and looked at the boy. "Yes, son?"

"Headmaster, Sir? How will we know who we are right for?"

"Ah, yes. That is a very good question. How will you know? Well, you will know that a person is right for you because you will see a halo around that person that no one else can see. If you are truly right for each other, both will see that same glow in the other. When you see that glow, go to that person and take his or her hand. You will know immediately if he or she is right for you. There may be more than one person who glows for you, but we can't be sure."

Another hand shot up - this time a young, beautiful girl who looked very much like her older sister, Cho Chang. "Headmaster? What if there isn't anyone for us?"

"You should be fine. This magic is not intended to punish, Christine, but to help you; to help all of us, and create more happiness and make things better. If you do not find someone, you can wait until next year and see if there is a need for the ritual again or try to find someone on your own, like your older sister has done."

Sensing that there were no more questions, the professors began holding hands; forming a circle thirty feet in diameter that encompassed a large part of the center of the Great Hall. The one hundred and ninety-eight first and second-year students milled about in place in the middle of the circle. They were then joined by fifty-two

of the third-year students. The rest of the third-years backed away, against the walls, deciding that they either didn't want to find a partner the way the Headmaster was offering; or that they didn't have permission to become bonded, or thought that finding someone on their own would be more fun.

The two hundred and fifty students didn't have much room in which to move, but the confinement somehow added to the tension and excitement of what was about to happen.

As a group, they felt, rather than heard the incantation begin. At first, the magic hit them behind the ear...where the temporal bone protrudes in a semi-hemisphere. Christine Chang thought it felt like the reverberation from the lowest note on the piano. Michelle Sullivan, a first-year Ravenclaw from the States, thought it felt like the really low vibration she felt from the washing-machine at her parents' muggle home in Maryland.

SaklaniSubramanian, a beautiful Garhwali native with flowing black hair and brown eyes, thought it felt like her elephant's heartbeat when she lay asleep against his side at night; low, rumbling, and reassuring. Thoughts of time she spend working with her parents in the forests of Uttaranchal, north of Kainur, helping to protect the forests by doing selective logging and acting as guides for the area's many tourists came to mind unbidden. Until her eleventh birthday in May, she had been the chief mahout for the family, when her talents were accidentally discovered by agents of the local magical maharaja. A part of her missed the pungent smells of the forest and the love that she had shared with her elephant, Damayant.

As the magic grew more intense, the elephant tusk and phoenix-feather wand which had been made especially for her started to thrum with power and she reached down to grasp it. A white-hot surge of magic coursed through her body and lit up her every sense. It was both thrilling and frightening.

She wasn't alone. Ten feet from Saklani, near where Professor Vector stood with her arms outstretched, a young Canadian girl named Karen Rivet trembled with the power of the magic which had invaded her body. All around and through her; even up and into her

sex, the magic flowed and it felt like she was being intimately caressed by the hot jets which flowed from the magical springs in the mountains near her home.

As the seventh repetition of the charm began, the eleven, twelve, and thirteen-year old boys and girls began seeing auras flickering around each other. Some were bright white, while others were deepest green. Some, like the aura which surrounded the Weasley twins, flipped between gold and red or as the Patil twins saw around one pair of fraternal twins from the States, silver and deepest purple.

Too soon, the charm was complete and a strong, golden ring appeared in a line at the feet of the teachers; confining them within its boarder so that the soul-magic could work.

At first the students just looked around them to see whom they might be matched with and that was not easy. The first-year students were particularly vertically challenged and had a hard time seeing each other through the forest of taller students. Slowly however, pairs began to form – punctuated by squeals or cries of joy and unbelievable happiness and the crowded floor began to be a little less so.

The first one to make a match was Cho Chang – who threw herself into the waiting, open arms of the only person she had ever truly loved: Cedric Diggory. If ever there was a ‘golden couple’ at Hogwarts, Cho and Cedric were it.

There were some significant surprises in the pairings and the ancient headmistress smiled as she saw Neville Longbottom’s face break into incredible joy as both Padma and Parvati Patil bound with him; loosing themselves in the almost blinding light of an establishing pair-bond.

Tracey Davis was another surprise. She found her match in both Pansy Parkinson and Terence Higgs while Greg Goyle found that his match was Millicent Bulstrode. Vincent Crabbe lost any pretence of seriousness or grouchiness when his magic found its match in Mandy Brocklehurst, of Ravenclaw. Kevin Entwhistle found Lisa Turpin and

promptly lost himself in her arms while the beautiful, shy, and diminutive Su Li found that Edward Summerby was right for her.

Marietta Edgecombe looked around nervously for several long minutes; rubbing her anxious, sweaty palms on her skirt, hoping that she'd find someone wonderful. When she finally turned around and looked behind her, she saw Roger Davies – her friend since primary school - and the glow that surrounded him. She was so relieved and so happy that she threw herself into his arms and told him what he had already come to mean to her.

Wayne Hopkins and an amazing girl from the west coast of the States, Megan Jones, found each other and quickly crossed the circle and lost themselves to the other's affection. Hannah Abbot and Ernie Macmillan practically tripped over each other before realizing that they were glowing for each other.

Watching from a far corner; in front of where Remus Lupin was standing, Ron Weasley looked around and hoped that he'd find someone special. What he saw completely crushed his world-view. From across the circle, Ron Weasley saw a young boy named Lawrence Stebbins glowing...for him.

Ron panicked. He didn't know what to do. Him? Gay? A poofer? He knew that his parents would never accept that. More, he knew that his brothers would never accept it. Ron did the only thing he could do: he turn and ran from the circle.

So caught up by the spectacle that was occurring in front of them, the two nearest teachers, Remus Lupin and Aimee Bettencourt didn't realize that Ron had slipped between them and disappeared out of the Hall.

Eventually, the unpaired were down to twenty-five or so. SaklaniSubramanian finally realized that her match was waiting, with his hand out to her, to her right and across from her; near where the Headmaster was standing. His name was Kenneth Towler and he was a British ex-pat who's parents lived and worked in Mumbai. He was tall, tanned, and had smiling, bright-blue eyes and flowing brown hair which ended in a ponytail which hung down between his

shoulders. A single gold earring which glinted in the lights which lined the walls of the Hall dangled from his left ear and she laughed at the sexiness of it as she ran across the circle to him.

The Weasley twins were the big surprise of the night though, as Angelina Johnson, Alicia Spinnet, and Katie Bell all made their way over to and into the open arms of the glowing boys. Somehow, it made sense...but as all the teachers would later agree, it was going to be very, very difficult to explain to anyone who didn't see it happen.

The twins laughed, along with their new brides-to-be, at Lee Jordan. Lee was taken completely by surprise as he saw Lavender Brown light up in his presence.

As the last pairs formed, Lawrence Stebbins was left, standing forlornly. Finally, he was the last one left and all the teachers watched; waiting to see what happened to him. They were all about to give up hope when Susan Bones and Eleanor Branstone – who had paired off earlier – made their way back into the circle and over to where Lawrence stood. The girls raised their hands and touched each side of his face and hesitantly, he did the same to them. Swaying back and forth, the three stood. Suddenly, there was a brilliant flare of light – much light all the other pairs and threesomes that had formed throughout the night. However, when the girls dropped their hands away from his face, the boy who had stood there a moment before was gone and in his place was a beautiful young girl, with shoulder-length hair and the all of the physical features that make girls the special creatures that they are. Lawrence Stebbins was forever gone and in his place stood a very happy, satisfied, and newly-christened Lauren Stebbins.

When the three held their hands up together, there was a cheer from all the teachers and students and the ring which had surrounded them all disappeared. No one knew or realized that there was a missing student and no one bothered to make a head-count.

Since the ritual was over, the now bonded students were hustled together and told that they would not longer be living in their 'old' dorms, but rather, would be moving to the tower reserved for married / bonded students and that each couple/threesome/five-some (in the

case of the Weasley twins and their three conjugal wives) would be sharing a room.

The school's elves were summoned and politely asked by the Headmistress if they would go and retrieve all of the bonded students' belongings and transfer them to the new dorm.

All the teachers were tired and not one of them wanted the duty of having to baby-sit / advise / protect a group of students who had not yet begun to come to terms with the fact that they now had life-partners and that they no longer had the luxury of being for only themselves.

It was one of the 'first-born' students who saved the day by suggesting that Professor Kettle be made head of the new 'house' and that he also be made to live in the dorm itself, along with his wife, so that they could keep an eye out on what was going on in the dorm at all times.

Myrddin smacked himself in the forehead with feigned shame and consternation. "Excellent thought, Karen! I will go and summon Professor Kettle immediately and find out if he and his wife are willing to be co-opted for the position. I hope that he doesn't immediately see it as a way to squeeze me for money!"

The 'first-born' girl actually had the audacity to say "Well, it's going to cost you ten galleons to make sure it doesn't" and hold her ground when the Headmaster scoffed good-naturedly at her no-subtle-at-all attempt at extortion.

He bent over slightly and smiled at her; pushing his glasses up his nose as he did so. "Tell you what: I'll take one point from your house by tomorrow night if you can't think of a more fun way to get your ten galleons. Now run along to your dorm, ok?"

Karen paled at the point lose and then immediately brightened up as ideas started running through her head. "You're on, Professor!"

With that, she took off in the direction of her new dorm; following the processional of newly-bonded students.

Feeling satisfied with the way the evening had gone, Myrddin made his way up the steps towards the entrance to the invisible tower which housed all of the professors. He hoped that Professor Kettle would open to the idea of being the resident 'house-dad' for the bonded students. It was apparent from the amount of positive feedback that 'Minerva' had received that Professor was one of the best choices he had made in a very long time.

As he walked, Myrddin realized that though he wasn't quite 'middle-aged' yet, he was tired. More tired than he expected to be after only fourteen hours. There was a time, when his son was founding the school that he could work for twenty or more hours without even breaking a sweat. "Am I too old?" he wondered. He was tired, he had to admit, but he wasn't quite willing to think himself 'too old' yet.

He was still deep in thought when the door to the hidden tower appeared suddenly and Lawrence Kettle appeared, along with his wife. The man seemed relaxed, if a bit puzzled by the Headmasters' arrival.

"Good evening, Albus. My wife and I were just about to floo back to London for the weekend."

"Well, actually, I was hoping that I could persuade you and her to help me with a project that we started tonight."

The three fell in step together back down the hallway and towards the stairs which would take them to the first floor and the foyer in front of the Great Hall, where the public floo was located. As they walked, Professor Kettle looked at the Headmaster and said, "So, tell me about this project that you've started. I assume that it has to do with the ritual I heard about from Professors Vector and Sinistra"

Stroking his beard, as he often did when he was trying to figure out the best way to say something, 'Albus' considered how to talk to the muggle-born professor about what had been done with the first- and second-year students.

"When did you first fall in love, Lawrence?"

“About the time that I turned thirteen or fourteen, why?”

“Was she special to you? And were you special to her as well?”

“Yes, she was and I think I was....but what’s that got to do with anything?”

“Consider this: If you had had a chance to find the exactly right person for you – a lifetime bond-mate – at about that age, would you have been inclined to do so?”

Lawrence thought about that for a moment, and then thought about the lonely misery which had been his high-school years. Memories of being married young and then divorced after only five and a half years together momentarily haunted him. A reassuring hand intertwined itself with his and a pair of knowing eyes searched his face to try to figure out about what sadness he was thinking.

“I think so” came his slow reply. “It would have saved me from a great deal of heartache and sadness later on.”

“Well, in essence, that’s what the other professors and I did tonight for all of the first- and second-year students and about half of the third-years as well. We made it possible for them to find a perfectly matched, magically suited mate or mates.”

Dr. Kettle did some quick math in his head before looking at the Headmaster in surprise. “You mean to tell me that you helped about 250 students find mates? And that these aren’t just girlfriends or boyfriends, but lifetime-mates?”

“Yes, that’s basically it. You’ve already met a couple of them. Harry and Hermione Potter, Draco and Daphne Greengrass, and Luna and Ginny Weasley. What I was hoping is that you and your wife would be willing to take over in the new dorm as ‘house-parents’ or ‘residential advisors’”

“What kind of a commitment are you asking for? How many weekends would we have free?”

“There are three Hogsmeade weekends per month that you would have free, like this weekend, that begin Friday night at 7 Pm and end Sunday night at 9 Pm. Usually the second weekend of the month is restricted, so at least one of you would have to be around all weekend, unless you took turns being present in the dorm.”

The conversation went back and forth for the rest of the walk down to the Great Hall Foyer. By the time the three reached the public floor grate, they had hammered out an agreement in principal. As Dumbledore left the couple and made his way back up to his office, he smiled as he realized to his chagrin that Ms. Karen Rivet would indeed get her galleons, as the negotiation had cost him significantly more than he had planned.

Forty-five minutes later, ‘Minerva’ McGonagall was sitting on the floor of the newest dorm, with one hundred and forty-nine students gathered around her. Each student was sitting in the lap of or otherwise holding onto his or her bond-mate. They were all dressed in pajamas or other comfortable clothes and there was a feeling of expectancy in the air and magic was practically shimmering in the air because of all of the new bonds.

The Deputy Headmistress rued the fact that the six already bonded students were absent for this particular meeting and hoped that she’d be able to get them to address the students before the next week was out. She knew that they could answer their friends’ questions much more easily and that their answers would probably be better received than any that she might give to the students.

Looking around, she saw hopeful, happy faces. Some were so lost in the new love that they were feeling that it was all but impossible to get them to focus their attention on her. She thought about giving the meeting up entirely; writing it off as a lost cause, when the potion-master’s wife, Elizabeth, came into the room and sat down next to her. She had changed out of her ‘hospital whites’ and into an almost floor-length long, dark green and extremely comfortable-looking three-quarters’-sleeved woven silk dress. It was unusual to see her away from her husbands’ side after work and she made a note of the fact that he wasn’t with her.

Leaning over, she said quietly, "Where's Johan?"

Elizabeth's eyes brightened for a moment. "He's doing some well-earned research. Hermione gave him unlimited access to that amazing library which she was given by that crazy elf and since Harry's down in Hogsmeade for the weekend with the others, Johan figured that he'd immerse himself for a couple of hours. Of course, the Headmaster's completely put out."

'Minerva' looked at her friend of more than twenty years. "Oh? Why?"

The fabulous medi-witch actually tittered for a moment. "Hermione's library wouldn't allow him to actually touch or read any of the books. Every time the Headmaster touched a book, he got a nasty shock."

That set off a host of private questions for the Deputy Headmistress. "I wonder what's in that library that Myrddin is so anxious to see. Surely he's seen all of those books before. Nicolas gave him access to his personal library a long time ago. What could be so important?"

So lost in thought was she that she didn't realize that every eye was on her...save for the ones that were preoccupied with snogging towards the back of the room. Even Elizabeth was looking at her a bit strangely.

Abruptly, she sat up straighter in her chair and looked around. The couples who had been 'getting to know each other better' – which included the five-some of the Weasley twins and their three wives – stopped and turned to give her their attention as well.

"I'm sorry. It must be the hour. I didn't mean to 'zone out' on all of you like that." 'Minerva' was very proud of herself that she was able to use a recent Muggle colloquialism in context and get it right. "The reason that all of you are here tonight is because of that magic that you are all feeling right now and yes, I can even feel it. It's like you're all vibrating with it. I'm not so old that I'm unaffected by it."

That earned a laugh from many of the students. She wasn't unaware that she had been compared (for age) with the building itself and the

building had come off the better for it. Of course, if any of the students learned the truth about her age, she knew that those jokes would only get worse. “Almost two thousand years old. Ha! And I don’t feel a day over fifty” she thought, completely without bitterness. The first thousand years had been the hardest, anyway.

“All of you have questions. I know that. To some extent, there’s nothing I can do about it, either. What you’re all experiencing hasn’t happened since just after the First World War and there were not many notes made about the experiences then. I can tell you a couple of important things, before I turn the meeting over to Madame Pomfrey. First, the person or persons you are with will be, if you work at it, your life partner or partners. You will never be alone again. That’s the good part. The voice or voices that you are hearing in your heads will always be with you – parted from you only upon your death, or theirs. In the weeks to come, you will learn how to ‘close off’ a part of your mind for periods of time so that you are all alone with your thoughts. Doing so is actually good...because it will give you the quiet that you are all used to having...and all need to some extent; at least at times.

Now, some of you will experience the bonding more deeply than others. For some of you, there will be a full and complete sharing of not just each others’ thoughts, but emotions, images, and needs. For the boys, that means you will feel the full burden of your bond-mates’ monthly cycle and all of the emotions that go with it. For the girls, you will feel your bond-mates’ needs and desires and yes, I am talking about what you think I am talking about. You will feel his desire for you and it will feel almost palpable. Hopefully, with time, that will be something that benefits you both and feeds your bond; making it that much stronger. Again, Madame Pomfrey will tell you about that and help all of you to deal with it.

A fairly lively bit of conversation sprung up immediately and it took several long minutes for McGonagall to get the room back under control. “One of the things that we’ve noticed, at least among the three bonded couples, who made it to Hogwarts over the summer, is that your magic will be far stronger when you are holding hands and attempting charms and other types of magic. There is a positive ‘feedback’ of sorts that seems to take place. We, your professors,

along with some individuals from the Ministry of Magics' Unspeakable division, are studying this right now. The Headmaster has suggested that a gathering of all of you, along with the three already established, bonded couples to test whether or not there is any limit to the effect. I, for one, think that it might be well worthwhile after you've all settled in."

She paused, as if to tick items off some kind of weird, invisible checklist, and then continued. "For lack of a better word, we are going to refer to all of you simply as 'the bonded' and I will make announcements from time to time that 'the bonded' have to do some bloody thing or other. You'll know that I mean all of you." She swept her arm across in front of her, in a graceful gesture. She wasn't one to gesticulate often, but the wave served its purpose by keeping their attention.

"Before I turn the meeting over to Madame Pomfrey, I do want to say a couple of things that are personal. One, as I am head of this house, until a suitable replacement can be found, I want you all to be on your best behavior. What happens in this new dorm in the weeks to come will reflect on you; the school, the Headmaster, and on your bond-mate. You are no longer alone in your actions and you must act accordingly.

Second - what happens tonight matters...All of you will be sharing a bed with someone else – at least someone of the opposite sex - for the first time in your lives. It matters a great deal because the things that are said between you and the feelings that you share may very well dictate what kind of relationship you have for the rest of your lives. Each of you will be sharing a bed with someone who is feeling just as vulnerable; just as scared as you are. He or she is just as worried about what you think about him or her. I urge you to be gentle and understanding. Be patient with each other and...most of all...be open and honest about what you are feeling. If you're scared, say so! If you're happy...say that, too. Please remember that you are no longer alone in this world and that you have a chance to experience something very, very special and wonderful."

As she looked around, there were many more couples holding hands or hugging than when she started her spiel. "Good", she thought.

“I can see that you’re already taking my words to heart. Good. I’m glad. I’m going to now turn the meeting over to Madame Pomfrey. Give her your attention and remember that for your purposes here, tonight, she’s a teacher and can give out detentions and take or give points just like any other professor here. Understood?”

There were nodding heads all around. “Well then, I will take my leave. If I am needed, at any point, ring the enchanted bell that’s over on the table in the corner. It will wake me.”

She stood and left the assembled students; picking her path between them carefully. On the way out, she secured the entranceway again; making sure that no unbonded student could pass into the special dorm.

Almost an hour later, Elizabeth Snape made her way out of the dorm as well. She had answered every manner of question about a girls’ period; what it could mean to feel a girls’ cramps and reassured all of the boys that she would do everything in her power to help them through that experience the first time. The girls’ questions had been considerably more blunt than she had anticipated as well and she blushed furiously as she told them about what they were likely to experience as their male partners started to have wet dreams and fantasize about them.

She too had wished that Harry, Hermione and the others had been at the meeting and wondered why Johan had released them on their own recognizance for the weekend without first pushing them into being at the meeting. Elizabeth thought that it was probable that her husband didn’t want to burden the six of them any more than was absolutely necessary.

As the meeting concluded, Elizabeth reiterated what Minerva had said to the students about being gentle and understanding – but added her own thoughts about what they needed to do for each other. At the end, she wished them all well and told them that the Headmaster had been right when he had told Harry that the most powerful force known in all of wizardry was love.

By twos and threes, the students had gathered themselves up and made their way up to their private rooms. Most all of them would not be seen again until Monday morning.

Kildonan Lodge Hotel – Hogsmeade – 8:15 Pm – September 6th

The Thestral-drawn carriage which had brought the three bonded couples all the way from the doors of the school stopped in front of the Kildonan Lodge Hotel. The waning moon wouldn't rise for another seven hours and the ride down from the castle had been dark and foreboding, so Harry was grateful for the gas-lit torches which burned brightly every ten feet along the Hotels' driveway.

Getting out first, Harry held out his hand and helped Hermione down the short steps. Draco did the same for Daphne and then both he and Harry helped Ginny and Luna.

When the six young people were ready, they walked up to the tall double-doors of the Hotel, which Harry and Draco held open for their wives and friends. It was something that Harry had seen the Headmaster do for the Deputy Headmistress and for the other female teachers on the staff and instinctively understood that he should do it too.

Once they reached the check-in counter, Harry stepped forward, as agreed, and dealt with their reservations. James Augustus Smythe was just going off-shift when Harry stepped up. Not wanting to be impolite, Smythe turned and bade Harry good evening.

"Hello. I'm looking for three of your best rooms for the weekend."

Not wanting to appear impolite, but dubious of Harry's ability to pay for such rooms, he looked at the young boy. "Where are your parents? Shouldn't they be making the reservations?"

Harry looked at him and realized that the man had no idea who Harry was. It was a relief, in a way, and Harry smiled him his best smile. "Sir, my name is Harold James Potter. My friends call me Harry."

It wasn't often that James Augustus Smythe was taken by surprise and so it took a moment for him to recover himself. When he felt composed enough to address the young man properly, he continued. "I am very sorry, Lord Potter. Please forgive me for not recognizing you. Your father and mother visited our hotel in Edinburgh once and I should have been more attentive. You have..."

Harry smiled. "Yes, my mother's eyes. I know...."

Smythe's composure fled as he realized that he had just put his foot solidly into his mouth. "I'm...sorry, Lord Potter. Please forgive me" he said, softly. "I didn't mean..."

Harry waved it off dismissively. "I know, Sir. Don't worry about it. Look....can I get the rooms I'm looking for? My wife and I, and our friends, want to stay here for the weekend. We don't have to be back to school until Sunday night...so we'd be checking out late...probably after dinner here, if we can."

Hermione stepped up and put her arm around Harry's waist while the man bent down and looked at his availability. "Be gentle with him, Harry. I'm sure he didn't mean anything hurtful."

Caressing the small of her back with his hand, Harry tucked his hand into the back pocket of her jeans and pulled her closer.

Finally, the day-manager looked up and said, "We have the three rooms you're looking for, Lord Potter. They're arranged along the private hallway on the top floor and look out over the valley. Each has a private balcony, full hot tub, bar, and sauna, as well as a canopied king bed. Will that be enough?"

Hermione thought they sounded wonderful and told Harry so privately. Agreeing, Harry stepped forward. "Perfect. Gringotts bank draft or credit card?"

"Gringotts card would do well. Should I make reservations for dinner tomorrow night?"

“Yes, please.” Turning to Draco, Daphne, Ginny, and Luna, he said, “Seven fifteen tomorrow night for dinner all right?”

There were happy nods all around, so Harry turned back and handed over his black-platinum Gringotts card. Smythe swiped it and then handed it back. “That will be fifty a night for each of the three rooms. Breakfast is complimentary and high tea starts at four in the Grand Parlour.”

Figuring that Four Pm. would be just perfect, because it would give them enough time to shop in the village, Hermione smiled and took the room keys that the Manager held out to her. She passed cards back to Draco and Ginny before pulling Harry towards the lift that would take them up to their room. For the first time, Hermione Potter felt like a real adult and was very excited about being alone, in a hotel, with her husband.

Some say that the most important thing between couples; the glue that binds couples together is good sex. Others say that the most important thing is love. There is a third group that says that the most important thing is trust. Harry Potter thought that all three were right...and all three were wrong. Hermione loved Harry and he loved her – but there was more to their relationship than either physical or emotional desire. It was the instinctive, unhesitating willingness to sacrifice himself for her happiness and to protect her life, with the implicit knowledge that she would do the same that mattered most.

As Harry stretched out naked on his back, he thought about how much his life had changed and how he could never have imagined that he would be in a four-star hotel, with the one person who loved him more than life itself, in a world very much apart from anything he would have ever known if he had stayed with his hated relatives.

He and Hermione had come a long way, too. The first night that they had slept together, he had been so afraid of what she thought of his body and now, he felt completely comfortable in his skin – because he had learned just how much she accepted him for who and what he was.

Hermione, too, was a changed girl, though she still mostly had the figure of a girl and not that of a woman. 'Chipmunk cheeks' still plagued her and she was frustrated that her breasts had barely begun to grow (it was more than a little annoying that they were tender to the touch all the time). She had no hips to speak of and yet, Harry loved her and accepted her and always wanted to hold her. He loved her hair; calling it 'lustrous' and 'beautiful'. It made her happy to know that the part of her that she found most frustrating was the part that he seemed to appreciate most openly.

The two things that set Hermione Potter apart, and signified her adulthood, were the mesmerizing, internally-flawless, one-carat sea-green sapphire studs which adorned her ears and the pear-cut 2.75 ct. perfect white diamond, with baguette-cut red sapphires on either side on the ring-finger of her left hand.

Coming out of the private loo – which was so big that it was almost an entire room by itself – Hermione looked over at her husband. She was dressed only in a pretty pair of white cotton, G-string knickers that both tantalized and tortured Harry as he watched her walk over to the edge of the bed.

"You're beautiful, 'Mione."

"I don't feel beautiful right now. My hair's a mess, I've got cramps, my neck hurts..."

Harry smiled as he reached a hand out to her. "C'mere. I'll give you a massage and we can sleep as long as we like in the morning."

Hermione couldn't help but feel a tingle of desire in her sex as Harry's hand met hers and he pulled her down, onto the bed, so that she was lying next to him. The way he looked at her made her feel as wanted and loved as any girl could feel and there was no way she was going to be able to resist his enticement.

"Roll over on your stomach?" Harry said into her mind, as he ran his libidinous hands up and down her body, before settling on her small but sexy bottom.

Hermione moaned into his mouth as she leaned forward and kissed him. His hands were so warm; so gentle that she couldn't help but want more. "Anything, Harry...just don't stop...feels really good."

His erection throbbed between his legs, as it had from the first moment that he saw her come out of the loo. She could feel his desire for her and for her touch as well. "I won't. I want you too."

An hour later, Hermione lay face down, asleep, on top of her husband. He had given her a thorough massage before she crawled on top of him. They both knew that within a day or two, several things would happen that would test their tolerance for pain. For Hermione, it was the onset of her period, while for him; it was the activation of the growth potions that he had been taking for all of August.

As the need to sleep claimed him, Harry pulled the blankets up and around her shoulders; adjusting them so that no part of her would be cold during the night.

Two doors down, Ginny Weasley-Lovegood lay curled around her blonde wife and best friend. While they were both way too young to do all of the things that they wanted to do, their forays into snogging and mutual exploration had both deepened their desires and given each more access to the others' thoughts and feelings. They were not even close to being as intimately connected as Harry and Hermione – but that wasn't for a lack of love or desire. It was, Luna thought, because of her special gifts. Only she could control the images and perceptions that she had. Inflicting them on was not something Luna would ever be willing to do; for the madness they might cause. She loved her red-headed bride way too much for that.

Draco and Daphne, on the other hand, had done a good bit of mutual exploring and were enjoying the freedom that they had to try some things that one of Hermione's books had suggested. The dog-eared pages had been particularly interesting and enlightening and Daphne made a mental note to thank her for sharing.....just as soon as she could walk straight again. Draco's hands were very, very good.

Sunday afternoon – in Hogwarts Greenhouse three – September 8, 1991

Neville Longbottom had always been a shy, retiring child. Growing up around adults, he had learned to talk to adults and so did not have the kinds of social skills that all children needed in order to survive around their peers. He was surprised, therefore, that Padma and Parvati Patil could worm their ways into his heart and into his mind so quickly and so easily and that he could come to care about two girls so much.

Because they knew that the weather would soon turn against them, the three decided to take a walk around the grounds of the school and enjoy the unusually warm sunshine that was gracing southern Scotland.

Neville thought that it might be fun to see if there was any ripe fruit available in the greenhouses – both because he always enjoyed nicking fruit from his own family's greenhouse, to the consternation of the head house-elf, and because he thought it would be fun to feed his two new wives something sweet.

The best fruit trees were kept at the far back left-hand corner of the eighth-mile long greenhouse and it was a long walk to get there, but Neville was holding hands with his two, new loves and didn't mind it at all. They were just about to cross over to the next aisle when Padma saw the body. She pulled hard on Neville's hand to get his attention and then Parvati screamed as she, too, saw the prone form lying on the ground.

It was Ron Weasley.

Turning to Parvati, Neville said, "GO! Get Professor Sprout or the Headmistress! Hurry!"

Parvati didn't question her husband, and since she was the faster runner, took off like a rabbit back to the Castle.

Padma and Neville quickly hurried to Ron's side and propped him up. He wasn't breathing and his body felt cold and stiff. Neville checked

him over and saw flecks of dried spittle at the corners of the boy's mouth. As he searched the rest of the boy's body, he found a clump of plant material clutched in the left hand. Carefully, Neville lifted a bit of it up and smelled it. The moment that the pungent odor hit his nose, Neville knew what had happened.

Gently, he laid the boy's hand back into his lap and stood up; pulling Padma away. She looked at him with confusion in her eyes.

Neville silently told her, across their bond, what he thought had happened. Neither saw the note that was clutched in the boy's other hand.

Padma had seen death only once before – when her great aunt Lakshmi had passed away. It was no kinder to the young boy than it had been to her aunt. Gone was any kind of smile and gone, too, was the life in the eyes. His katra – his spirit - was gone.

She thought about the prayer for mercy she had been taught by her father as a little girl:

I muse on my heart and I ponder this question:
When shall I again be at one with Varuna?
Will he accept without rancor my offering?
When, reassured, shall I taste of his mercy?

I question myself on my sin, O Varuna,
desirous to know it. I seek out the wise
to ask them; the sages all give me this answer,
"The God, great Varuna, is angry with you."

What, then, O God, is my greatest transgression
for which you would ruin your singer, your friend?
Tell me, O God who knows all and lacks nothing,
so that, quickly prostrating, I may sinless crave pardon.

Loose us from the yoke of the sins of our fathers
and also from those we ourselves have committed.
Release your servant, as a thief is set free
from his crime or as a calf is loosed from its cord.

The last two lines struck Padma as particularly important. She could tell that the young boy had taken his own life and she knew that was a particularly sinful, but she couldn't help but wonder what had made the boy do it. She had never known sadness enough to want to kill herself and she couldn't imagine what had come into the boy's life to make him feel like that. She wondered if he was begging for release and thought he must have been; but from what, she didn't know.

Neville couldn't tell how much time had passed, as he and Padma had been lost into their bond, feeling sadness for the boy whom they barely knew, but soon there were voices and pounding feet and three red-headed children all racing their way.

Once again, Padma felt her husband pull on her hand; away from the fallen boy and out of the way of the teachers who were gathering. Parvati was once again with them and both Padma and Neville reached out and pulled him into their arms; leaving the adults to sort out what had really happened to Ronald Billius Weasley.

Moving with speed that no one knew he possessed, the Headmaster moved to the young boy's side and knelt down. That the boy was dead was obvious. Myrddin had seen death far too often to not know that the boy had passed beyond. Sweeping a lock of unruly hair from the boy's face, Myrddin ever so gently drew the boy's eyes closed, and then stood up. It was, unfortunately, a universally-understood sign and it struck the three Weasley boys hard. Fred and George, feeling guilt for the way they had treated their youngest brother, fell into the arms of their three wives and began crying the tears of those who never got to say 'I love you' or 'I'm sorry'. Percy tried to remain stoic, but was unable to overcome the sense that he had failed his youngest brother and that his parents would never forgive him for not watching over him better. Minerva McGonagall, who had always been sensitive to and appreciative of Percy's sense of organization, discipline, and obligation, took the young man into a hug, as he lost his mask of control and began sobbing.

With dignity that some had doubted from time to time that she had, Pomona Sprout wandlessly conjured a dark, wooded bier and lifted Ron's body onto it. She took time to fold his hands over his chest;

noting that there was a piece of paper clutched in the boy's hand but unwilling to remove it until he had been transported to the hospital wing for a proper examination.

It took everyone a long minute to gather themselves sufficiently for the walk back up to the Castle. Neville, Padma, and Parvati held onto each other and tried to remain out of the way. Katie, Alicia, and Angelina supported Fred and George with all the magic they could muster and helped them focus enough to put one foot in front of the other as they wended their way out of the greenhouse and up to the castle.

Guiding him with one arm, Minerva guided Percy along behind the rest. She could feel the sobs racking his body and realized that he must have been holding in a great deal over the years; more than he ever should have had to, given how strong his brothers were in their time and how good a father Arthur always was for them.

Johan Severus Snape had been late in arriving at the greenhouse and had therefore not had much of a role to play, other than observing. When he realized that it was the youngest Weasley who had died, he had felt a certain relief, but then ruthlessly squashed that emotion as being totally unworthy of him and contrary to everything he had tried to be for Lily's sake.

He watched until the last person had passed out of the greenhouse before going over to the spot where the boy had been found. Looking in the tray that rested on the rough-hewn growing table above the boy's head, he tried to figure out what the boy might have ingested that would have killed him. It didn't take long. Several of the Aconite plants had been ripped up and their freshest leaves picked over.

Seeing no other plants that the boy could have eaten that would have made him die so quickly, Snape turned on his heel and walked back to the Castle. He would have to consult with Pomona about the wisdom of growing deadly poisonous plants out in the open, with no safeguards whatsoever. More importantly, he also had to find out how the boy knew to go for that particular plant.

By the time the processional made it to the front doors, the news that a first-year student had died had flown around the school, twice and it was therefore a surprise to no one that the students were lined up in more-or-less orderly rows on either side of the hall at what passed for attention. The person who was surprised most was the Headmaster himself; for he had never before seen the students so quiet or respectful.

As the bier passed within, there was a strangled cry from the doorway. Every head turned to see Ginny Weasley-Lovegood racing towards her brother's prone, still body. Minerva McGonagall wondered which thoughtful person had seen fit to summon back the youngest Weasley. No one wanted to stop Ginny from her grief and so she was allowed to approach her brother's body. Percy gently eased his way towards her and after she had been allowed to touch her brother's face and take in the fact that he was really gone, took his sister into his arms and stroked her hair as she cried on his shoulder.

It was at that moment that many of the younger students lost their composure and began crying. There weren't enough teachers to comfort them all, and so Myrddin was grateful that all of the first- and second-year students had bonded successfully; because it gave them people to turn to in their sadness.

He leaned over and said to Pomona, "Pomona, please....take Ron's body up to Poppy. She'll want to do an autopsy. I will go and let Arthur and Molly know."

Pomona nodded and wandlessly wished the bier forward and up the stairs, towards the hospital. As his potions-master passed by, 'Albus' stopped him. "Johan, please help your wife. She'll want to do an autopsy and that will take your expertise."

Shaking his head, Johan looked at his headmaster. "No need, Albus. I already know what killed the boy. He ate large amounts of freshly-picked Aconite. It was more than enough to kill him. No, what we need to know is why."

Suicide. It was the thing that Myrddin feared most. Even if they found out why it happened there would be inquiries and recriminations

enough to distract them for months and he knew it would make the professors doubt his leadership and his wisdom...and theirs might be the least of the doubts with which he would have to contend. Because of the rarity of suicide in Wizarding Britain, Myrddin knew he would have to deal with the Ministry as well; including the 'pureblood' faction.

The students, those who were not crying, were waiting for the Headmaster to say something' to reassure them all or at least, to provide some measure of solace. He found adequate words hard to come by. Finally he said, "I know that many of you have questions about what has happened. I have them too. I do not know why Mr. Weasley has left us...but I want you to know that I feel the same loss and same confusion that all of you do. The only thing I can tell all of you now is that it is more important than ever that we support each other and find ways to love and honor each other. I have only two request before I go upstairs and the first is that all of you restrain your impulse to let the outside world know about this until I am able to contact Arthur and Molly Weasley directly. They do not deserve the terrible hurt of learning about their son's passing from The Daily Prophet. Secondly, I would ask you all to show Percy, Fred, George, and Ginny the kind of support and care that any of you would want if you were in the same circumstances. Thank you"

It didn't take long for the Headmaster's first request to be honored. The Head Boy and Girl immediately restricted access to the Owlery; making it impossible for any student to send or receive mail for at least twenty-four hours. All house-elves were notified of the ban and the reasoning behind it, and they all agreed not to take messages anywhere for the same twenty-four hours.

The only ways for messages to come or go was through the public floo in the foyer of the Great Hall or the Headmaster's private floo. The former was blocked immediately and the second was accessible only by the Headmaster or Deputy Headmistress.

The question of how best to help Ginny and her brothers was what preoccupied the school for the balance of the day. Luna had asked her suite-mates to give her the space and support necessary to care for Ginny and to try to help her work through the loss. Katie, Angelina, and Alicia took a more direct approach – by taking their two husbands

to bed and allowing them to lose themselves in the girls' touches as they coped with the loss of their youngest brother.

Percy found his own comfort and therapy by going, in the company of Penelope Clearwater, to Ron's room in Gryffindor tower and beginning to sort through Ron's things, in an effort to get to know who his brother was and trying to figure out what might have, in a sense, killed him. What he eventually did find both surprised and comforted him, even amongst the tears. Ron's private journal was a mass of emotional contradictions, but it was clear that Ron knew how much he was loved by his family – even if there were times when he wanted to rage against the world. In that, he was a very typical boy and Percy couldn't help but smile as he recognized a bit of himself in the words Ron had left behind.

Headmaster's Office – Hogwarts – 4:55 Pm – Sunday, September 8th

Myrddin closed his eyes and knelt in front of the floo. Gone were his formal robes or even his work robes. In their place was a gray, woolen singlet, tied with a brown belt. It was what one wore for the ritual of penitence.

Throwing a handful of floo-powder into the fireplace, he waited for the green fire which signaled a connection. Once it was established, he called out, "the burrow".

Arthur Weasley's face soon showed up in the fire. "Albus? What can I do for you?"

"Can you and Molly come through? I have something I need to tell you."

"Ah....sure. Give us a minute to gather ourselves." Myrddin nodded. What was coming...he couldn't know, but he knew it wasn't going to be easy.

A minute passed, and then another before his floor lit once more and two figures, both redheads, stepped through. Both were dressed in dark-red and green tartan travelling cloaks.

He looked at them with sadness and Molly immediately blanched. "What is it, Albus?" she said.

Laying his wand on his desk, Myrddin shook his head and then said quietly, "Molly, Arthur...I don't know how to tell you this..." The middle-aged witch sucked in a breath and covered her mouth with her hands. It didn't take anything to piece together the fact that something had happened to one of her children. Arthur put a strong hand on his wife's shoulder, to reassure her that she was loved.

Haltingly, Myrddin began his story; telling them about the bonding ritual and about all of the children who found life-partners. Eventually, he got to the part about Lawrence Stebbins and his miraculous transformation into Lauren Stebbins.

Then he reached the part that he knew would be the hardest. "Today..." he started. "Today Neville Longbottom was walking in greenhouse three with his two wives when he found..."

"Ron?" Molly whispered it as a question.

Myrddin hung his head. "I'm sorry, Molly."

He took from his pocket the folded note which had been found clutched in Ron's hand and handed to Arthur. He had not read it; respecting their privacy and the sanctity of intra-family communications.

After they had read the note, Arthur tucked it away into the inner pocket of his travelling cloak. As Molly's husband for more than twenty-five years, he knew what his wife was feeling, even if she didn't say it. It was rage....but rage conditioned with a bitter feeling of loss and the wish that they had been able to talk to him; to lead him out of the feelings which had turned inwards in the boy and made him take his own life.

When Molly looked up, after she cleared the tears away from her eyes, she saw something that astounded her. Albus Dumbledore was on his knees before them, with his head bowed. His voice caught her off-guard as he said, "Forgive me, Molly. Forgive me for causing your loss and for failing to watch over your son."

Arthur, as a former Unspeakable, had never seen the Ritual of Penitence before, though he had heard of it. The clothing, and the lack of a wand, compounded by the fact that the man was on his knees, made Arthur realize what he was asking for.

Like most all magical rituals, the key to it was held in the will of the one undergoing the ritual. If the person's magic judged their actions to be sufficiently heinous, it would desert the person forever, rendering him or her a Muggle. Its judgment was final and immediate.

It was the act of someone who was either truly contrite or unspeakably foolish and Arthur knew that Albus was not the latter.

"Please", Albus said.

There was nothing for it. Gathering every memory that he had ever had of being with Ron; of being a father to him or seeing him with his brothers and sisters, Arthur touched his wand to his forehead and drew away the enormous silvery slug and touched it to the Headmaster's forehead.

Molly followed her husband's example and with his help, gathered all the memories she had of Ron, before transferring them to the Headmaster.

Then they waited.

Minutes passed by as the sadness and loss that they felt etched itself into every crevice of the Headmaster's mind and tore away any façade the man might have had.

Finally, 'Albus Dumbledore'; Supreme Mugwump, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Winner of the Order of the Phoenix, First Class,

looked up at his guests as Fawkes, his Phoenix trilled, and said again, “forgive me?”

That he was still a wizard was proof enough for Arthur that his penitence was genuine. He stepped forward and put a hand on Albus’ shoulder. “I forgive you, Albus.”

Molly wasn’t quite as ready. She stepped forward and backhanded Albus hard across the face. “Forgiven”.

The slap stung, but not as much the emotion behind it. Molly Weasley would never trust him again. Albus wondered what was worse: betraying Ron by not looking out for him or failing Arthur, Molly, and their children. Either way, Myrddin felt old and lost and not at all like the wise man he wanted to be.

Chapter Six

“Fallout”

By the_scribbler

the_scribbler (at)

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Disclaimer: I do not own any of the Harry Potter characters. All characters are creations of Joanne K Rowling, © 2007, to whom I am deeply indebted. I make no money from any of this.

Note one: I have ‘borrowed’ the idea of soul-bonded people sharing everything (including going through a girls’ period together) from the story “Soul Bonds are NOT Cool” by the writer Seel’vor. His story can be found at his YAHOO group:

Uk(dot)groups(dot)/group/seelvorfantfiction. Thank you, Seel’vor, for your kindness in letting me borrow.

Note two: This chapter is 12,007 words long; 31 pages.

From Chapter Five – “Partner for the Dance”

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Headmaster's Office – Hogwarts – Tuesday, September 10th – 9:05 Am.

"And how is it that you think you can continue as Headmaster here, Albus, after this happens on YOUR watch?"

In retrospect, 'Albus' thought he should have seen it coming. The Minister for Magic, a 'pureblood' bigot if ever there was one, was trying to use the death of Ron Weasley as an excuse to dislodge the Headmaster from his position; even though he had no viable replacements, save for the Deputy Headmistress, for the position.

Cornelius Fudge, from the beginning of his tenure, had vacillated between sending owls to Myrddin every day, asking for his help and his guidance, to now threatening his tenure. In the Muggle Britain, it would never have happened, he knew, because John Major was made of sterner stuff by far than Cornelius Fudge could ever imagine being. The situation was compounded by the fact that the United Kingdom had just gone to war against Iraq, which made it doubly implausible that anyone like Major would ever ask a 'non-elected' person such as himself for advice.

Raising himself up to his full stature, and putting the full power of his magic behind his aura, Myrddin Aurelianus looked at the pathetic wizard in front of him and considered what his options were in dealing with him. Deciding that the direct approach was probably better – or at least faster – Myrddin let his magic infuse the room; terrifying the man with the green bowler hat in front of him. "I tire of your pettiness and your incompetence, Cornelius. For the last time, Ron Weasleys'

death was not my fault. He was a marginal wizard at best and didn't have what it took to be a Hogwarts student. Now begone, lest I lose my patience."

Cornelius Fudge had never wet himself before, but he was perilously close to doing so. Before he completely lost his dignity, he made a dash for the floor and disappeared; leaving behind his walking staff, his traveling cloak, and his briefcase.

Dumbledore thought about his options for about two seconds before magically opening the case and perusing the documents therein. There was no reason not to get a sense of what the man was about, if the opportunity presented itself.

Twenty minutes later, he tripped across something truly enlightening. Something that he thought Harry Potter might very much appreciate. Flicking his wand, the stack of papers copied themselves, before the first stack returned (in its original, proper order) to the Minister's briefcase.

Sitting back, Myrddin took out his favorite pipe, lit it, and considered what could be done with the information he had just obtained.

Elsewhere in the school, students were grouching about their first-block classes (a double-block) and hoping that the rest of the week would not be as bad. Harry and Hermione were both fighting fatigue and trying desperately not to mess up the potion they were working on. It was the standard 'Shrinking solution' – or least it would have been, if Johan had not decided to see just how much he could push them. What they had been assigned to do was to create solution that would affect poltergeists – multi-dimensional beings that were not so much created as summoned. It was a particularly foul assignment for the first period of the day, when they weren't even completely awake.

After sixty-five minutes, Hermione decided to take a risk and summoned Peeves – the resident poltergeist. Either their potion was going to work or it wasn't and extra time would do nothing to improve its effectiveness.

Twenty seconds later, Peeves appeared above their heads. He was cackling as usual, and made a move to dive-bomb the nearest student when a floating blue globe of liquid intersected with him. For a moment, nothing happened. Then there was a horrendous POP! and Peeves was reduced to the size of a pea.

From behind them, an oily, nasty voice said “five points from Gryffindor for your summoning, Ms. Granger”. The voice was ‘nasty-evil’ Snape and it told them just what they were likely to expect for marks.

However, Hermione was unwilling to put up with be addressed improperly, and so turned and looked at their mentor. “Professor, if you are going to take points for my successful test, the least you can do is get my title right. I am the Lady Potter. Don’t forget it.”

“Or what?” Snape snarled back. “It seems to me that you are in my classroom and here I make the rules”.

Harry looked at him and taking his wife by the hand, he said, with a note of real and not pretend malice, “I am Lord Potter, professor, and you WILL NOT FORGET YOURSELF TO MY WIFE.”

Johan smiled inwardly. Harry was the consummate actor and he had learned to play the part of the indignant pureblood lord perfectly. Hermione, too, was beyond reproach when it came to playing up her position. It was as if the ‘Muggle-born’ witch was never a part of her background.

“Or what, Potter? Your parents were just as presumptuous and arrogant and they couldn’t back it up either.”

At this point, all other activity had come to a halt in the potions room. There wasn’t even so much as a whisper as everyone watched the ‘evil bat’ confront ‘the newest celebrity’. “Or what? I will crush you like a bug, professor or not. To me you’re just a slimy, failed potions master who couldn’t get an appointment anywhere else”.

For all of his emotional guards, Harry's retort stung and Harry was instantly apologetic for it. "Fifty points from Gryffindor, Potter, and a week's worth of detentions, I think".

Harry smirked. "No."

That caught the Potions-master short. He had never, ever been told 'no' by a student. For a moment, he was really angry and his face showed it. "You dare contradict me?"

"I'm willing to bet that the Headmaster will side with me, so yes, I dare. You disrespected my wife and insulted me and I won't tolerate it." Harry was standing now, and his wand was out.

Looking around, Johan realized the class had come to a screeching halt, as every one of the students stood gaping at the confrontation. "Everyone OUT. NOW. Leave your potions. I will grade them."

When no one moved, Johan did his best Dumbledore impression and tried to infuse his magic into his aura, before yelling at them. "GET OUT NOW."

He was only partially successful in convincing the students to leave. Many of them wanted to stay behind and 'see the fireworks', so there was a bottle-neck at the doorway as they took their time in leaving.

Not wanting to be seen as being weak, Johan took out his wand and threw a stunner at Harry and Hermione. It never even got close, as the shield which protected them sprang into life and sent it ricocheting against the ceiling. Johan's second stunner, a more powerful one, slammed into the shield and died in a spectacular display of red fireworks. There was cheering from the group by the door and yells for Harry to 'get the bat'.

The third one had everything Johan could give it. It succeeded in destroying their combined shield, but died when Harry caught it on his wand-tip. He was smiling a feral, evil smile. "We can play that game too, professor."

Johan looked at him; scared for the first time in his life. He had never, ever seen such power in children. They should not have been able to catch a stunner so casually, nor block his stunners so completely.

“Get out, Potter. I will see you expelled for attacking a professor.”

“We’ll see, professor, we’ll see”. Harry’s tone was dripping with sarcasm and it was clear who had won the confrontation. Snape had been made to look impotent and weak by allowing a first-year student to call him out and then showing him to be completely unable to control him.

The frustrating truth was that Johan really had forgotten to address Hermione properly and didn’t know how to get himself out of the situation. As he retreated, he tried to figure out how he was going to reclaim his mantle of ‘greasy, oily git’, ‘crazy bat’, and ‘dark-lord sympathizer’ without seeming to put Harry or Hermione through really onerous, awful detentions. He knew that he’d have to catch up with them at some point, privately, and work something out, so that they could rescue the situation.

Within thirty minutes, news of Harry and Hermione’s confrontation with the potions-master was all over the school. Myrddin had heard it directly from several of the portraits which hung near the potions-lab. Worrying that the situation might spiral out of control, he summoned Johan to his office so that they could consult.

When Johan entered the office, ‘Albus’ looked at him; his fingers steepled in front of him in a thoughtful repose. “Ah, Johan, thank you for coming so quickly. I heard about your unfortunate confrontation with Harry and Hermione. Tell me what happened from your perspective.” Johan sat down, hard, into the softly cushioned armchair and began the story; including the disturbing bits about Harry and Hermione’s growing powers.

“They were all but laughing at me, Albus. I’m pretty sure that I posed no threat to them at all. Mr. Potter caught my most powerful stunner

on his wand-tip, as if it was completely natural to do so. I've never seen anything like it."

"Perhaps you've forgotten, my friend, what happened to you the day they bonded?"

Johan reflexively reached up and rubbed the back of his head, where the books had made their pointed contact that day; just over a month before. "No, Albus, I've not forgotten. Apparently, I'm just a slow learner."

'Albus' chuckled. "Not as slow as I, I'm afraid. I should have warned you not to call them out in public. Their shield is not like anything I've ever seen. When they are asleep, there is a golden glow that surrounds them and protects them. It's as if Hogwarts itself wants them safe. I doubt that any force short of God himself could hurt them, here, now."

Johan felt a bit perturbed by the fact that the Headmaster had not warned him about it earlier and he said so.

"It is my fault, Johan. It is an old mans' failing. I try to keep track of so much, and yet...." Snape knew what the Headmaster was saying. No one could do it all in his position, despite how hard one might try.

"Forgiven, Albus. The question is what we do now. I've put myself in the position of having failed in calling out a first year student. I'm never going to be able to regain control of my classes!"

"Aye. I had hoped that we would be able to avoid this situation with you or any of your colleagues. Harry and Hermione would never have done this to Minerva, I'm pretty sure, nor Filius, or even Pomona. By being our resident 'bad guy'...."

"Fucking Slytherins" Snape muttered under his breath.

Having exceptionally good hearing, the Headmaster caught what his potions-master had said. "Perhaps, Johan, perhaps. But be that as it may, we still have to figure out a way out of this. Harry and Hermione care about you too much to let this slide, but they can't afford for their

own political reasons, to back down publically. Especially since they've shown that they can get the better of you."

"So what are we going to do?"

"Give them another target."

Snape looked at him; puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Well, if your comment about the 'fucking Slytherins' is true, there are those among that house whom hold no love for Harry Potter. Perhaps if we push them at him, we could sort of kill two birds with one stone. We diffuse the situation between you, Harry, and Hermione, while at the same time ridding ourselves of some of the more problematic sixth- or seventh-year students in your house."

Myrddin could see the wheels in Johan's head begin to turn and smiled when what looked like a conclusion settled on the man's face. "Young Ms. Tonks is currently enjoying the nighttime company of one of my seventh-year boys as well as that of a seventh-year girl from Ravenclaw. They have been getting some harassment from the other snakes. If I pushed Harry towards befriending Ms. Tonks, it might be the in we need."

"I must warn you Johan that Harry's not going to like being manipulated. If he gets wind of this, he will blame us both and it could make it really hard for us to make him into the leader that we're going to need."

Snape looked at him and nodded. There was no doubt that the Headmaster was right in observing that Harry would not want, nor would he like, being manipulated in order to save the potion-masters' standing as 'resident bad-guy'. Thinking about it, he turned away for a moment; staring up at the sorting hat that sat on the top shelf of the left-most wall. "Why don't we just tell him? His shields are good enough that no one is going to get it out of him and he's certainly cunning enough to pull it off. All we have to do is incentivize him right."

"You sure, Johan? Is that not taking a huge risk?"

“Well, is it any more of a risk than not telling him? And isn’t it the keeping of secrets that’s gotten us into problems before?”

Myrddin thought about that for a moment. There was the small business of his true identity, of course, along with the ‘blasted prophecy’, as well as issue of the Fidelius charm which was ultimately betrayed...and many others; too many to count, really.

“Alright, Johan. We’ll do it your way. Let’s get Harry and Hermione up here and figure out how we can salvage this situation. We need you in your role as ‘the evil bat’ for a while longer, I think, before you can give it up. If Harry and Hermione can help protect that, then I’m for it.”

“Sooner than later, Albus. We can’t have this situation fester. Already, I’m going to be the laughing stock in front of all of my students. It’s going to set back what little I’ve been able to teach them.”

“I agree, Johan. Let’s do it today.”

“I will leave it to your discretion then, Headmaster. Let me know when I’m needed. I can all but assure you that today will be totally and completely wasted.”

The Great Hall – Noon - Hogwarts – Tuesday, September 10th

Ginny Weasley sat side by side with her wife, Luna, and across from Harry, Hermione, and many of the other bonded; including Draco and Daphne. It was a congenial group and there was a great deal of laughter as they talked about how Harry had been turned into a very, very large, purple eggplant by Minerva McGonagall in their last class of the morning.

He was holding Hermione’s hand as he said to the others, “It was really weird. I couldn’t feel anything except for a kind of ‘roundness’. I felt Hermione’s touch in my mind, so I knew that I would be all right, but it was strange.”

“You looked good as an eggplant, Harry. I could tell it was you, though, because the leaves on top were just as out of control as your hair always is.”

That earned an ‘awwwwwwwwwww’ from several of the girls for the cuteness (and truth) of the comment. It also caused Harry to blush furiously. His hair was something that he was embarrassed by at times, and sometimes secretly pleased with – at least when Hermione was running her fingers through it affectionately.

Harry noticed that Ginny was watching him particularly intently and Harry, in turn, was watching her. “Love? I think I need to talk to Ginny for a moment. Can you distract everyone else?”

Hermione knew exactly why Harry was concerned about the young girl, as she had been following the meandering flow of his thoughts for several minutes, so she made a point of taking out her wand and pointing it at several of the ghosts; making them shift color from transparent-gray to brilliant, rainbow colors. Since the ghosts themselves couldn’t do magic, they were unable to undo the charm and spent several long minutes floating around like scintillating neon bulbs.

The distraction gave Harry enough time to lean across to Ginny and take her face in his hands. With her permission, he entered her thoughts. It was a bit odd at first, because he not only ‘heard’ Ginny, but Luna as well. Once he was used to it though, it was easy to talk to her and find out how she was doing, given the sudden death of her brother.

Ginny shared with him the conversation that she had had with her parents, after they had talked to the Headmaster. One thing about it struck Harry immediately: That Arthur Weasley was a considerably more engaged father than he could have imagined and that he really had loved Ginny’s older brother. More, Arthur had been truly saddened by the fact that Ginny and Ron had never gotten on well and even though they loved each other, because they were family, they weren’t friends and never liked each other.

Before Harry withdrew from her thoughts, he gave Ginny the private password to his and Hermione's quarters, so that if she ever wanted to talk, she could come find them.

Once he had withdrawn from her mind, and dropped his hands away from her face, Ginny practically threw herself across the table and into an almost bone-crushing hug with him. It took Harry off-guard at first, but he quickly settled into it and squeezed her back; letting her know that she was special, too, and that he really did feel sad for her over Ron's passing.

The twins watched approvingly from a ways down the Gryffindor table, across from where Harry, Hermione, Ginny and the others were sitting. Ginny was their only sister and while they were sometimes frightened by her displays of temper, she was to them something more precious than gold; their feelings of total and complete devotion and love.

Once Ginny settled back from the hug and sat down again, a tall shadow crossed the table between her and Harry. "Ms. Weasley-Lovegood?" the voice said. Ginny looked up. It was easy to know to whom the voice belonged. It was a Glasgow accent, with definite patrician overtones and only one person in the school had it: the Deputy Headmistress. Ginny thought that she had been good and hadn't done anything meriting punishment, so she looked up, meekly, and said, "Yes, Headmistress?"

"Come with me. We are overdue for a conversation. Bring your love with you. We'll be away for a while, I think." Both Ginny and Luna immediately stood up and, after gathering their books and things, fell into place behind the Deputy Headmistress. As she was about to leave, the Transfiguration professor turned to Hermione and said, "Five points to Ravenclaw for your excellent use of charms, Lady Potter."

Harry was so busy watching them leave that he didn't see the small, folded note that landed on his plate. Hermione did though and taking the initiative, opened it.

Tuesday, Sept. 10th.

Harry, Hermione – please come to my office as soon as you can. I've spoken with Johan and the four of us need to meet to discuss urgent matters.

Remember that I love sugar quills.

Regards,

A.P. B.W. Dumbledore

Hermione 'read' it to him over their bond and with the password in hand for the Headmasters' office, Harry and Hermione gathered their things as well and made a bee-line for his office. The 'falling-out' with Snape had been foremost on their minds and neither was willing to just let the matter rest. Johan had gone to too much work and had sacrificed too much already on their behalf for Harry or Hermione to simply discard.

Once they reached the stone gargoyles that guarded the passageway to the Headmasters' office, they gave the password and tore up the stairs; anxious to get the meeting underway.

Harry and Hermione's quarters – Bonded Tower - Tuesday, September 10th - 9:55 Pm.

Closing his eyes, Harry Potter laid back and pulled the covers up, so that he and Hermione were both warm and comfortable. It had been a grievously long day – at least emotionally. The confrontation with Johan, and then the meeting with him and the Headmaster after lunch had taken a lot out of both of them. Topping it off was the fact that Hermione's period had hit just before dinner and she was tired, irritable, and in pain. Without Madame Pomfrey's monthly concoction, Harry knew that she'd be almost non-functional. Of course, being soul-bonded with someone going through it was enough to make him want to kill someone and so they had wisely (and quickly) retreated to their private suite after dinner, so that Hermione could soak in the

hot-tub for a while and let the Medi-witches' brew work its own particular magic.

One thing that concerned Harry was the feeling that the nutritional/growth potions that they had been taking for over a month would be kicking in soon. He prayed that it would not overlap with what Hermione was experiencing – because he didn't want to add to her physical problems.

Hermione, on the other hand, thought that any distraction would be welcome. She had always had more of a problem in the months when she was ovulating from her left ovary as opposed to her right...and this was a 'left' month.

One good thing about being the daughter of medical professionals was that she knew everything (and then some) that an almost twelve year-old girl should know about female anatomy and reproductive biology. Her mother had insisted, when she turned eleven, that she have her own copy of 'Our Bodies, Ourselves' from the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. Hermione had found it to be particularly interesting, given what she had witnessed her parents doing most evenings, after they thought she had gone to bed.

Hermione was not alone, of course. Like most large groups of girls / women living in close proximity, the cycles of the bonded females living in the tower had begun the inexorable process of converging and would probably finish doing so just about the time Christmas break happened. It was just one more thing about being at a boarding school that she should have (she thought) been warned about before arriving, but wasn't, either because she was 'Muggle-born' or because there was some other bias against her. She made a mental note to ask Ginny and Luna about it, when she could.

"Harry? Rub my lower back?"

"Sure, love. Roll over onto your stomach" Hermione did so and soon, Harry's hands were moving in perfect, concentric circles on her lower back while he infused her at every point with his magic.

“How does that feel?”

Hermione pushed love and affection for him across their bond for what he was doing. “Feels brilliant, Harry. I don’t know where you learned to do that, but it’s amazing.”

“Learned it from you, love. Saw your dreams of when your father rubbed your back.”

“I should write to him and tell him, Harry.”

“And I should meet with Professor Lupin about freeing Sirius. Now that we’re set for classes and things are stable, I should be able to focus on it as my project.”

They went back and forth for a while until Hermione started to drift off to sleep. Harry was not far behind and soon, they were oblivious to the world.

Tuesday, September 17th -Harry and Hermione’s quarters – Bonded Tower – 6:55 Am.

Amrita woke, stretched her wings, and looked at her master and mistress in the twilight of the dawn. Somehow they seemed different than they had before. It was as if they were stronger...bigger, too. Like they had suddenly grown enormously. She could almost feel their magic, too. It was feral and alive in a way that it hadn’t been before.

She looked around. The room was quiet and everything seemed undisturbed, which made her feel like her master and mistress were safe. Not knowing why that made her so happy, the beautiful wyvern curled up again; carefully laying her head next to her master’s back so that her wickedly sharp horns would not hurt him. Her last, happy thought as sleep took her once again was...warm.

At ten minutes before eight, Hermione Jane, the Lady Potter, stirred. She felt a gentle hand cupping her left breast and warm breath flowing down and across the nape of her neck. There was something

warm and hard pressing against her bum and she giggled as she realized what it was. Reaching down behind her, she cupped her husbands' stone-hard erection; stroking it up and down several times. Harry was not yet awake, but she could feel his body's overwhelming desire for her and her own body responded immediately in kind.

Amrita was suddenly very much awake and alarmed. She knew, without knowing why she knew, that if her master and mistress bonded sexually before they were really ready, it could be a real problem.

"Mistress!"

"Whahhhht?" she replied silently. She was mentally groggy and couldn't understand why their familiar was trying to talk to her.

"You must not take our master inside you. You're not ready."

Hermione didn't answer their familiar immediately, because she was too far asleep. Once the beautiful, serpentine dragon realized this, she withdrew her touch from her mistresses' mind; but kept a careful watch over what was happening between them.

Within minutes though, Hermione felt Harry's orgasm, both physically and magically and the energy of it jarred her out of her stupor. Her naked back and bum were covered in his release and, for the moment, she was just awake enough to crawl out of bed and head towards their private loo and the two-person, carved-granite and brass-adorned shower therein.

When she was finished showering – something she had done while still mostly asleep - she stepped out of the magical enclosure, dried off, and walked back into their bedroom. The temperature differential between the loo and their bedroom woke her up a good bit more and she saw Harry, still stretched out on the bed. She knew it was Harry because of his black hair and green eyes...but was still hesitant, because this Harry was no longer 4'10", but seemed to be closer to 5'6. He was no longer the thin, under-muscled boy either, but rather a fully proportioned, rather strongly-muscled young man. Once Hermione had taken in Harry's overall proportions, her eyes

immediately wandered between his legs....and she gasped. No longer was there a small 'sapling', but in its place...a mighty oak; a tower-of-power; a basilisk rather than a snake. No matter how she thought about it; one thing was sure. It was huge. Then she turned and headed towards their walk-in closet. The moment that she saw herself naked in the mirror....she fainted.

What seemed like a moment later, Harry Potter was holding his wife's head in his naked lap and gently caressing her forehead with a warm, damp cloth.

"You all right? You fainted."

"How did you know? You were asleep on the bed."

"Amrita fairly screamed in my mind and I was pretty much awake immediately. Damn, she's loud."

"It was the only way, master" Amrita interjected, a little defensively.

"It's alright, Amri. You did the right thing. We love you for protecting us."

Amri looked across the room where she lay on the bed and actually color-shifted through the rainbow in pride and appreciation of her master's words. Hermione thought that it was like watching her parents' telly at home go through its color-test before it set up – just much, much more spectacular.

"That's way cool, Amri. We didn't know you could do that."

"That makes three of us, Mistress. I didn't know I could, either. I like it, though."

"Kind of assures that you're always the best-dressed, right?"

The wyvern could see her mistresses' thoughts about 'getting dressed' and picking out clothes and had to agree that she had it much easier than her mistress did when it came to 'getting ready'. The exchange made Harry laugh.

“Speaking of which, Hermione, have you looked in the mirror? I think you may need some new clothes.”

His eyes wandered up and down her body with great appreciation. Her breasts – which until the night before were barely more than puffy bumps - were now full ‘B’ or small ‘C’ – cups. Her hips had widened and had become much more definitively feminine. Her sex was covered by a soft, dewy mat of auburn curls and her stomach (and pretty much the rest of her, too) was flat, strong, and well-defined. In every way, she had become a young, and quite beautiful, woman.

“Oh my God, Harry!”

“Oh my God is right, Hermione. You’re beautiful. The most beautiful girl in all of Hogwarts or anywhere beyond.”

Hermione could feel how much Harry believed what he was saying and so she lifted herself off the ground and threw herself into his waiting arms; hugging him as if she would never, ever let him go.

They might have stayed that way for a great deal longer if someone had not banged on their door.

“Oh God, Harry. What time is it?”

“Are you a witch or not, Hermione?”

“Tempus!” she thought and suddenly, fiery green numbers sprang into existence at about head-height, four or so feet from her. “08:37” it read, before disappearing.

“Oh shit, oh shit, Harry. We’ve got to move! We’re not going to even have time for breakfast!”

“I’ll call for Dobby and see if he’d be willing to do us a favor, or if I can pay him a little something to go get us some breakfast sandwiches.”

“Be nice to him, Harry.”

“I will, Hermione.” Harry thought, to himself, that Hermione’s admonishment was unnecessary, given the fact that he knew, better than any other student in the school, just what it felt like to be treated like a slave, but he didn’t say anything.

Once he was dressed, Harry moved quickly to gather both their school bags and make sure that they had all the pens, extra parchment, ink, spiral notebooks, and things they would need for the day. Hermione was struggling with what to wear, given that she had suddenly and dramatically outgrown most all of her clothes. Finally, when they were just about out of time, Harry raced over to where Hermione stood, in nothing more than bra and uncomfortably-tight looking cotton knickers, and reached up for the light-pink sundress that she had worn the day that they had taken their first-year exams. “It’s the best you’ve got until we can go shopping this afternoon. We’ll swap barn-duty with the twins and go to Hogsmeade.”

Hermione looked at him and then nodded. She put the dress on; pulled her school cloak around her, slipped on her low heels, and then took his arm as they made their way quickly to the sealed door which kept out the outside world.

As they walked, Harry called for Dobby and the little elf appeared next to them; floating a couple of inches off the ground. Quickly and as gently as he could, he asked the slightly crazy elf if he’d be willing; in exchange for several pairs of lurid purple socks and twenty sickles, to get them breakfast sandwiches and portable containers of chilled pumpkin juice. Bouncing with happiness, Dobby smiled hugely and then disappeared. By the time he re-appeared, Harry and Hermione were half-way to their Care of Magical Creatures class.

It was a good thing that Harry and Hermione were the last ones to class, because it allowed them to join the back of the cue of students waiting for Professor Hagrid to come out and call them to order.

About a minute after Harry and Hermione showed up, the enormous professor’s door opened and he stepped out, smiling. “G’morning t’ya.

Now, I see that the Potters have joined us and so I'll ask them to come forward for a moment."

Not knowing what was going on, Harry and Hermione hesitantly made their way through the assembled students and towards the steps of the cabin. "G'morning Harry, Hermione. I thought I'd have a bit of a surprise for the rest of the students this morning, once I found out about your special familiar. I've been planning this for more than a week, so could you call her, please?"

"Which one, Professor? Hedwig or Amrita?"

The half-giant chuckled. "No, Harry. We'll be going over owls, Kneazles, and things like that in a couple of weeks. This morning, I'd like you to call...what did you name her? Amrita?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well then, please call Amrita here."

Hermione stepped up and put her hand on the professor's arm. "Please, sir. I don't know how she's going to react. There are a lot of students and she's not that big yet. She's only seven months old."

Hagrid actually stopped and thought about that for a moment. "I see your point, Hermione. Tell you what. We'll ask her to land in the pumpkin patch, on top of that really big one over there." He pointed to the far right corner, where a six-foot high pumpkin was still growing on its slowly withering vine.

Harry and Hermione communed about it for a moment and then called the rainbow-colored wyvern to them. A brilliant burst of fire, about fifteen feet off the ground announced Amrita's arrival. Her amazing, jet-black wings were fully unfurled and she circled the entire group a couple of times. Harry directed her to the pumpkin that Hagrid had pointed out and Amrita agreed that it would be a decent place to land. Harry warmed the air around her, to keep the chill of the morning off her, and she settled decorously on the enormous orange gourd.

Hagrid watched her with something akin to love on his face. "I've always wanted a dragon of m'own", he said almost to himself. Harry heard him and placed a hand on the half-giant's hand. "Sir" he said cautiously, "If I could find another one like her, would you want me to get him or her for you?"

Rubeus looked down at the young man and wondered for a moment if James Potter hadn't just been re-born in his son. It was exactly the kind of impulsive generosity that James had been noted for on the staff when he was a student. "I couldn't ask it of ye, Harry."

"Fiddlesticks" Hermione thought to her husband. "You sure you could get one, Harry?"

"Pretty sure, Hermione. The owner of the Magical Menagerie in Diagon Alley told me whom he had bought Amrita from, even if it was only accidentally, and with the right amount of galleons, it shouldn't be that hard. Hagrid's more than qualified to care for one and if I paid the registration fee at the Ministry, I think our problems would be solved. Plus, it wouldn't hurt for Amrita to have the company of one of her own here."

"Master? You'd do that for me?"

"It would be for all of us, Amrita. And yes, I'd do it for you. You're my beautiful, powerful super-dragon, aren't you?"

Hermione beamed at him.

"You know that if you do this Harry, you'll have to deal with Dumbledore if there are problems."

"Yea, I know. But I get the feeling that it's not going to stop me; now or in the future."

Harry looked up at the Professor and said, "It's not a matter of asking, Professor, it's a matter of my offering it. And yes, you could ask it, and I would still happily say yes."

He was damned if he didn't see a tear form at the corner of the huge man's right eye. "You're just like your father, Harry. He was a good man, too."

Whatever else happened for the rest of the day, Harry knew in that instant that it would not affect him. He had just been told that he was good...and was just like his father. It was a hugely powerful, warming feeling and in that moment, no one could do him wrong.

The rest of the class seemingly flew by. Amrita was patient with everyone and did everything Harry asked of her, without complaint. She allowed all of the students to touch her tail and her horns and all of them got to look at her wings up close. For a closer, she did a low-level, high-speed pass that ended in the sudden and immediate death of a ferret that the Professor let out for the demonstration. As Amrita sat and ate; something that none of the students particularly wanted to watch, Hagrid had them gather around him again and he quizzed them on what they had observed and what they thought they had learned. At the end, he assigned three feet of parchment on Wyverns and their anatomical and magical differences from other dragons – due in two weeks' time. Harry and Hermione were not exempt.

On the walk back to the castle, there was some proto-typical grumbling about the assignment – which was rebutted by gentle reminders that at least, they could talk to Amrita through Harry or Hermione and that anyone who thought that he or she was disadvantaged by the arrangement could go and find some other wyvern to talk to. Since there was no such other familiar around that any of them knew about, the complaints quietly died.

Dumbledore Square; Hogsmeade Village, 3:45 Pm.

The portkey which the Deputy Headmistress had created for them dropped them precisely in the middle of the square – which would have been fine, except that the middle of the square – like similar pedestrian squares all over Europe, magical or otherwise – was

occupied by a large fountain. Harry and Hermione were dropped right into the deepest and coldest part.

Staggering out of the fountain a moment later, Hermione was fuming. "That unmitigated bitch! She did that on purpose!"

Drying his wife with a quick wave of his wand, Harry tried desperately to get her to calm down. It had been such a good day that he didn't want it ruined by a fight with Hermione over something that was, probably he thought, an accident.

"She probably doesn't make a lot of port-keys, Hermione, and so she forgot that the fountain was there, that's all."

Hermione was still fuming, but she was dry and her purse and things were all safe, so there was no real harm done. "Shhhhhhhhhhhh. It's all right, Hermione. We're here together to shop and to have some fun. Let's enjoy it. McGonagall said that we didn't have to be back until eight...so we can have dinner together before we go back. The twins said that there's a new American place up the street that's got great food and is really fun."

Hermione tried to calm down and think about just having fun and shopping with her husband and eventually her nerves were settled enough so that they could go into Gladrags together.

Forty-five minutes later, Hermione Jane Potter was a completely changed woman. The light pink sundress was gone, along with the too-small knickers, and in their place – a whole new wardrobe. She bought three changes of school skirts and four regulation blouses along with multiple pairs of black, blue, and grey tights; eight pairs of shoes in various styles, and six new dresses. Harry insisted that she also buy a couple of pairs of jeans, some t-shirts, and as a special treat – three completely gorgeous (and very expensive) knit Acromantulas-silk sweaters for when the weather turned cold. The sweaters were school-approved, so they could be worn over the dress-blouse and under school robes.

Harry got decked out similarly – minus the skirts, blouses, tights, and sweaters. He bought six pairs of fine wool school-dress pants; eight Burberry dress-white, button-down shirts; new socks, boxers, and four pairs of J. dress-black shoes. Harry had a certain image to maintain, as Lord Potter, and if Draco had taught him one thing, it was that first impressions are really important.

Harry actually wished that Draco was with them – because he didn't much trust his own tastes and he knew that Draco could have made sure that Harry was dressed in style. "Why don't we take him and Daphne shopping with us before the holidays? I'm sure they'd love it and it might be really fun."

Harry promised her that he'd broach it with Draco when they got back, because he thought it sounded like an awesome idea.

There were only two places left to go before their shopping was concluded and they could go to dinner. One was Madam Malkin's – which was actually just a store-front and a floo-connection to the store in Diagon Alley. A throw of floo-powder and suddenly, Harry and Hermione were in the Alley. Harry thought that was pretty cool, because it allowed him to take Hermione to Silk Enchantments – a lingerie store for witches that he had heard some fourth-year girls gossiping about in the Great Hall. It was supposed to be the best place to go for really nice, if expensive, underthings for ones' witch and Harry was bound and determined that Hermione was going to have the best clothes – clothes that she could feel really proud of wearing. He never wanted anyone to feel the way he had felt at the Dursleys, if there was anything he could do to prevent it.

AS they walked along, Harry could see the late-afternoon light streaming through Hermione's skirt and it highlighted the fact that Hermione was sans knickers. The thought excited Harry a great deal and soon they found themselves in a small, very private grotto off the main alley. Several privacy- and notice-me-not charms later and Hermione was flat on her back on one of the clean, white-granite benches; her new wool skirt bunched up around her waist, with Harry

was on his knees between her legs, pleasuring her orally for the first time.

She was so worked up that her climaxes hit as a massive tidal-wave of pleasure within a minute or so of his assault and it left her breathless and flush. "Oh my God, Harry. That was wonderful!"

They had been dreaming about and talking about taking care of each others' needs in this most intimate of ways, but neither had had the chance or the courage to try it first.

"Me next?"

"As soon as I catch my breath, yes" Hermione answered; still a little knackered by the force of her orgasms.

Harry was almost as desperate as his wife had been for relief. The physical changes wrought by the multiple growth potions that he had taken for over a month were playing hob with his hormones and he was as worked-up as he could imagine being. His erection ached in his slacks and he knew that it wouldn't take much of his wife's touch to cause him to explode.

Hermione could feel his desire and was excited by the thought of taking him into her mouth; just as her mother did for her father. She liked the thought of being able to do something just as well or better than her mother could. She was nothing, if not competitive.

After she was able to calm down enough, Hermione straightened out her skirt and sat up. Reaching out, she tucked two fingers into Harry's belt-loops and pulled him close, so that his zipper was close to being at her nose-level. She unzipped him with her teeth, as she had seen her mother do on countless occasions, and then reached in and fished-out his towering erection.

If Harry's magical powers had a physical manifestation, it was the size of his organ. Like males everywhere, Harry was unsure whether his length was bad, good, or otherwise – but he assumed from Hermione's immediate hunger for it that his size was 'good'. He could not know that he wasn't like males elsewhere and that in fact, he was

so far beyond normal that there wasn't adequate description for his endowment other than to say that it fell in the 'extraordinary' column.

The moment that Hermione's mouth closed around the tip of his organ, he let out the same kind of groan that men do everywhere. It was the primal sound of infinite pleasure both given and received and it thrilled Hermione to her core to hear it coming from her husband. It meant that she was doing 'it' right and that Harry would soon cum for her in the same way she had for him. Harry quickly muttered an incantation as he touched the base of his erection, before surrendering himself mentally and physically to her ministrations.

What seemed like both a moment and an eternity later, Harry erupted in Hermione's mouth; feeling pulse after pulse shoot through him and onto her waiting tongue. During the entire time that Hermione had been both stroking and sucking on him, she had heard the repeated litany of words/feelings in praise of her running through his mind and she felt deeply satisfied that she had taken care of him so well.

Licking her lips, she realized what Harry must have done at the last minute and laughed to herself. "Vanilla crème, Harry?"

Smiling and looking down at her, he thought, "A little something my Dad taught me when I talked to his portrait last week. He thought it might come in handy eventually. I'll have to tell him that it did, I guess"

Harry had a well-satisfied, 'Kneazle-that-ate-the-canary' smile on his face. "You sure you don't want me to tell him. I think that might be just the payback he deserves".

"You're wicked, you know that, love?"

"I'm your girl, Harry. Of course I'm wicked. Now help me up and we'll finish our shopping."

Harry let her wrap her delicate hand around his wrist before gently pulling her to her feet. Once she was up, he swept her into a passionate kiss, lingering kiss. "I love you, Hermione, and I always

will. Thank you for doing this with me. I've been pretty much desperate all day, but we didn't have time."

"I know, love. That's the way I felt too. Now, let's go before we start shagging right here."

Reaching down his back, she pinched his bum – which caused him to squeak in surprise – before taking her place by his side as they walked hand-in-hand out of the grotto. Neither of them saw it fade into nothingness again behind them as they left.

4:55 Pm. at Silk Enchantments; north end of Diagon Alley, off Charing Cross Road, London.

Hermione Jane Potter née Granger quietly entered the small boutique with Harry right behind her. The door closed almost silently, except for a small squeak at the end, when the edge of the door caught on a part of the raised, old-oak sill.

The store smelled of perfume; perhaps a bit of incense, and what reminded Hermione of the old cedar balls that her mother would put in with her wool sweaters at home to keep the moths out. It had all the touches of being an 'old-world' store – something that she might have expected out of the Victorian era. She completely missed the sign above the inside doorway which proudly proclaimed that the store had been in continuous operation since 1824.

After more than a minute had passed by, a tall, red-haired girl, who seemed to be in her mid- to late twenties came out of a back room. She was startled at Hermione's presence and seemed not to know what to do for a moment. Then she turned and called out, "Lindsay, could you come out here, we have customers."

Another girl, of similar appearance came out with a measuring tape in hand and apprised Hermione. "Student? Hogwarts? What can we do for you, Miss? I'm afraid we sell fairly high-end things here. Probably out of your price range."

Hermione winced momentarily at being called 'Miss' and wondered if the two girls had any idea who she was or what she represented. Probably not, she thought.

Harry stepped forward and put his arm around Hermione possessively. He looked at them and brought up his best Draco-inspired sneer – which was not much – but was better than he had started out with when Draco first tried to coach him on dealing with pure-blood bigots and their minions.

He purposefully hid his clan ring by rolling it over into his palm, so that the girl would not know that she was dealing with a Lord or an 'Ancient and Noble' house. It was more fun to spring that on her towards the end.

Hermione looked at them and then smirked herself. "Well, let's just say, for the sake of argument, that I'm not your typical customer and that I can afford whatever you're charging. Are you willing to help me or not?"

The taller of the two girls, Lindsay, looked at her and stood up a little straighter before she said, "Show me that you've got the galleons, girly, and maybe we'll bother."

Calling Hermione 'girly' was exactly the wrong thing to do in Harry's presence. Shedding any pretense of dispassionate observer, Harry let his magic infuse his being to the point where his presence was beginning to rattle the windows. He turned his ring back up so that he could stick it in the ignominious girls' face.

The display of raw, unabashed power got the girls' attention and he held it as he yelled in her face, "NOW YOU LITTLE SHIT, I AM THE LORD POTTER. I COULD BURN THIS FUCKING SHOP TO THE GROUND, REBUILD, AND NOT FEEL IT. DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?"

At the words, 'Lord Potter', both girls fell to their knees in unrestrained terror and neither dared look up as he finished his tirade.

They held up their right hands and Harry could see their two, similarly-styled rings glowing. One indicated that the girl was from the house of Draven, a cadet line to the Potters, and the other was from the house of Evans. Hermione looked on, fascinated by the interplay. "Harry, I think that they may be afraid that you're about to cast them from their houses, if their display means what I think it means. You have total and complete control over them right now, by displaying your Ducal ring and emphasizing that you're the Lord Potter. You need to choose your next words to them carefully. Remember what Draco and Daphne said."

"Get up, both of you. Now."

The two girls got to their feet, but could not meet his eyes. They stared fixedly at the ground in front of them.

"Is there any excuse at all for your pitiful display of manners or are both of you just completely ignorant of social graces?"

When neither answered, Harry infused his presence again with his magic and pushed his will at them a bit. It jarred them enough that the elder girl spoke up, hesitantly. "No, my Lord. We are sorry, my Lord. We didn't know it was you or your wife. We would never have treated...."

Harry cut them off with a wave of his hand. "I'm sure. Both of you have been told to run rough-shod over students and anyone who is not obviously a pure-blood. That ends today, am I clear?"

Neither answered, so Harry again pushed at them. "AM I CLEAR? OR DO I HAVE TO STRIP YOU BOTH OF YOUR MAGIC TO GET YOU TO ANSWER ME?"

His threat to turn them into squibs made both of them break out into hysterical sobs of fear and it quickly grated on his nerves. Hermione intervened by stepping forward and slapping both of the silly girls across the face. The stinging slaps; delivered with just a little bit more force than was completely necessary, made the girls shut up.

"God save me, Hermione, from stupid people..."

“Gentle, Harry...they’re just really badly trained” Hermione reminded him, softly. “Remember what Daphne said about expectations...”

“Oh, I know. I can hear her even now.”

“Carry on, then. We’ve not got all day.”

Harry stepped in front of the two quivering girls. Their hands were by their sides, but Harry could feel their desire to cover themselves or run and hide, somewhere – really anywhere that didn’t contain Harry Potter. When he looked at them – really looked them over, he realized that they weren’t unattractive. Both had high, firm breasts and slim hips and both were reasonably well-groomed and well-dressed, if perhaps a little conservatively. Then a wicked idea struck Harry.

Looking at the girls he simply said, “Strip. Now.”

They both looked at him completely mortified and for a moment, stood petrified. Harry began to raise his ring and point its tip at them when the first girl began tearing at the buttons of her blouse. Whatever she perceived in Harry’s ring, it was to her clearly a powerful threat and one worth acting on. The second girl, Lindsay, was jolted into action and began removing her clothes quickly as well. Within a minute, both girls stood naked in front of the Lord and Lady Potter; covering themselves with their hands as best they could.

Harry inspected them, but kept his hands resolutely by his side. He wasn’t leering or drooling over them at all, but rather assessing them, like someone might a cow or horse. Hermione was aware of his every feeling and thought and approved of what he was doing. “Hands down, now.” When they complied, he said, “Good, now you know what it feels to be looked at like a piece of meat; completely defenseless. That is the way that non- ‘so-called’-purebloods feel every day.” Moving quite close to Lindsay, he said, “Since you seem to be the brains of this outfit, I’m going to explain what I’m about to do to you. I expect you to comply. I also expect that you know the possible punishments if you don’t.”

Lindsay swallowed hard and then nodded.

“Ok. What we are going to do is to change your way of doing things here. Since I plan to buy this business tomorrow”

“Really?” Hermione interjected silently.

Without looking back at his wife Harry said, “Yes, I thought I would. Have piles of galleons not doing anything and I thought that this might be worthwhile. And besides, can’t you see all the bonded coming here and buying things? I can. Especially if we knock 30% or 35% off the top and get the prices down to a more reasonable level.”

“Un-huh. And maybe we pick Lavenders’ brain for new ideas? Or Parvati’s?”

“Now you’re thinking, love. Yes, that’s what we’ll do.”

He continued...”you better get used to the new rules. First, you will wear the creations that you make. Second, you will be, at all times, polite, sincere, and friendly towards all who enter this shop. Third, you will treat this store, its products, and its reputation as your own and you will NOT do anything to lower that reputation. AM I CLEAR?”

“Yes, my lord”, both girls responded quickly.

“I’m glad. My wife, the Lady Potter, is going to pick out outfits for you to wear as a sort of ‘uniform’. It will be the way you show off how good you both are in creating the kinds of clothes that wizards want to buy for their witches but are afraid to. You will model your creations and you will do so proudly. Understood?”

Lindsay thought about it for a moment and then started to brighten. She loved what she made, but was never allowed to wear them and never had enough money, even with a discount, to buy them for herself. She had been working at the store for almost ten years – since she was fourteen – and still couldn’t gather enough galleons together, after her weekly expenses, to buy what she made.

Both Harry and Hermione saw the flash of cognition on the girls' face and smiled. That the light was beginning to dawn for the taller girl was good. It had only taken close to thirty minutes to get there.

Hermione then stepped around Harry and handed each girl a handful of hangers. To Lindsay she presented a bustier/garter-belt/G-string ensemble with matching silk stockings while the other girl – 'Carol', she later discovered – received a more gauzy, semi-transparent, off-white outfit that had a matching bra- and knickers set and peek-a-boo robe.

Both girls were told to wear appropriate heels, so that their legs would be shown off to best advantage.

Once they were dressed in their new outfits, Hermione inspected them. She had seen her mother wear such things many, many times to tease and please her father, and knew how they were supposed to look and fit.

Each girl had something good going for her, physically, and the outfits were designed to highlight those things. Harry looked on approvingly; deciding that his spur-of-the-moment decision to buy the shop might work out nicely after all.

Harry stepped next to Hermione, so that they were both facing the girls who were standing side-by-side in the shops' 'custom-tailoring' area. "Now that you're both dressed in ways that reflect the things that you actually sell here, let's get down to business. Since I brought my wife in here so that she could get an entirely new set of knickers, we'd like to actually accomplish that. I'd also like to look at some of the other pretty things that you have for sale, since I might not make it back here before the sale goes through."

"My Lord, I can take care of your wife's needs, if she will let me" Lindsay said; fingering the length of magical measuring tape in her hand. "Will you help Carol decide how the store should look, since you are going to be the owner?"

Hermione and Harry silently considered the girls' suggestions for a moment and then acquiesced, as they saw nothing wrong with what she was saying.

Hermione essentially changed places with Lindsay in the tailoring area and, upon the girls' request, unbuttoned and stepped out of her school skirt – leaving her naked from the waist, down. Harry hadn't had a single sexual thought while the two clerks were naked, but the moment that Hermione undressed, he could feel his erection threatening to tear through his slacks. Hermione was Harry's perfect, ultimate aphrodisiac.

Carol did not miss her lords' reaction to his wife. The enormous tent that his erection made in his pants was more than proof enough that the wedding ring on her Lady's left hand was not just for show, but was the real deal. She wondered how two people so young could be married. Then, like the sun rising at Dover, she made the connection with the article she had read a couple of weeks before-hand. Hadn't it said that Harry Potter had a soul-bond with a Muggle-born witch?

She looked over at the beautiful, brown-haired young woman who was being fitted by her colleague and remembered the article. 'Hermione....' She struggled for a moment to remember the last name. Finally it came to her. 'Granger. Hermione Granger'. That was it. So this was the girl who had captured the heart of the most eligible young man in all of England. 'Interesting', she thought.

It didn't take much for Harry to catch on that his obvious reaction to Hermione's semi-nakedness had been observed by the young clerk in front of him and that she liked what she saw. Unfortunately, the embarrassment that Harry felt in being so caught was overwhelmed entirely by the love and desire that he felt for Hermione and for his appreciation of her incredible beauty.

Hermione felt the wave of desire and love rolling off her husband and turned towards him, feeling her own love and desire rise in her chest. "I can't wait to finish our bonding, Harry. I can feel how much you want it...and I want you to know that I want it the same way. I love you."

Their auras became visible, even as Hermione stood on the small riser, waiting for the older clerk to finish measuring her. At Hogwarts, the bonded were used to seeing the most powerful couples pulse and glow around each other. Outside of the school, though, it was a different story. It was definitely not something that one saw every day or even once a year, and for those who had been told, like Carol and Lindsay, that only 'pure-bloods' glowed like that, it was completely unsettling.

Harry had eyes only for Hermione and she knew it. It gave her confidence and strength that was completely beyond what anyone could describe as 'normal'. The closest one could come to knowing that kind of assurance were those Muggles who, for whatever reason, had died and passed beyond, only to be brought back by medical intervention.

Only they – who knew that they had, for sure, touched the face of God – and had His eternal blessing and love - carried with them the kind of perfect assurance that Hermione Jane Potter did on a daily basis.

Carol was dumbfounded by the display. Not only was everything she had been taught wrong, but it was obviously and patently wrong. It meant she was going to have to reassess her entire way of viewing the world – and that was going to take some careful thinking.

She wanted to say something to her Lord, but she was unsure what to say. There was a part of her...that she usually kept crammed down ruthlessly...that would admit to wanting to do considerably more than just look at the erection that was practically staring her in the face. Another part wanted to admit her shame in believing all the (apparent) tripe that she had been taught about supposed 'pure-blood' supremacy. The third, and at the moment, dominant part of her wanted to make sure that she met with her Lords' approval and that he wasn't just having them both on about buying the shop and changing the way things were done.

She didn't know what gave her the courage, but she finally raised her eyes up enough to look at him face-to-face and ask whether he was just putting them both on or not. His answer was short and swift. "I

don't play games with peoples' lives, Carol. When I said that I will buy this business, you can be assured that I meant it. In fact, let me do something right now."

He turned and stepped away from her so that he had a little room in which to operate. Drawing a circle on the floor, he laid down a small marble which he had taken from his pocket. It was a summoning-sphere and worked by remotely ringing a small bell, located at Gringotts bank. The bell was a courtesy bell and it meant that one of the banks large depositors was asking for the next available teller to come to wherever the sphere was located. The circle which Harry had drawn was actually a rune-sphere and it anchored the magic of the summoning-sphere and guaranteed safe passage for the person or persons being summoned.

In less than a minutes' time, a small, smartly dressed Goblin appeared in the center of the circle. Harry held out his ring, to prove his identity and right to use the summoning-sphere, and then said a long phrase in the Goblin mother-language. Translated, what he said approximated to: "You honor my tribe and my family by your prompt reply. May your treasures always abound. May your debtors fear you and may your creditors know your oath to be worth more than gold."

It was flowery, but because Harry had not used the sphere before, he thought it best to get off on the right foot, as it were, with the Goblin. The Goblin blinked and then said, in careful, clean, and unbroken English, "Your words honor me and mine. My prosperity is in my service to you."

Harry inclined his head in a slow bow, and then said, "Thank you for coming, Senior Teller Griphand. Your Lord Ragnok favors you most highly. I am almost ashamed that my request today is so small. It is unworthy of your esteemed attention."

"My Lord Potter, your needs are our needs. You have shown yourself most favorably with my people. What can I do for you today?"

"I wish to buy this business and would like the transaction to be handled carefully and swiftly. I would ask you to be my representative

and to be my hand and eyes in this matter. I know our golds will flow like a river if you will serve me this way.”

Hermione ‘listened’ to the exchange from where she stood. Lindsay was almost through fitting her and soon, she would be released from the girls’ gentle care. Harry was being extraordinarily careful in his words with the Goblin and Hermione smiled at it. Sometimes Harry was like a bull in a china-shop and other times, he was the most careful of dancers on the constantly-moving stage that was their life together.

Griphand looked about and made some quick notes to himself on a golden writing pad. After two minutes, he looked up at Harry, who – to Griphand’s surprise - had taken to one knee so that he could look at the Goblin face-to-face.

“I will have the offer papers drawn up in the morning, my Lord Potter. It should be a straightforward matter. Are there any caveats that you believe need to be a part of the transaction?”

“Yes. I will not purchase the business unless these two ladies...” Harry pointed to the two clerks, “Come with the transaction. I want their continued employment here certified as a part of the deal.”

The Goblin nodded. “Very good then, Lord Potter. I will be on my way then. Thank you for using Gringotts for your banking needs.”

“May your wealth and family overwhelm your every need and happiness, Griphand” Harry said, before the Goblin disappeared in an almost-blinding blue-white light.

Harry finished his conversation with Griphand at about the same time Hermione finished hers with Lindsay. He watched as Hermione shimmied into one of her new pairs of Acromantulas-silk, bikini knickers and felt his need and desire for her rise again, even stronger than it had been just minutes ago. It was amazing that such a small piece of cloth, strategically placed, could have such a powerful effect

on him...but it did. Hermione knew it, too, and felt herself flush with the rush of desire that he was sending to her across their bond.

“You have no idea, ‘Mione, how incredible you look.”

Hermione crooked a finger at him, “Come give me a kiss.” Harry did not hesitate. He practically flowed across the room to her and took her in his arms; kissing her as though his life depended on it.

Carol and Lindsay watched from off to the side of the shop; jealous that a girl nine or ten years their junior could have so completely captured the heart of one of magical Britain’s future leaders. Both knew to keep their thoughts in check, though. It was more than a little obvious that it wouldn’t pay to upset their new boss.

After a good thirty-second snog, Harry and Hermione separated and she finished dressing. Lindsay had thoughtfully bagged up all of her new knickers – eighteen pairs in all – and had added, for good measure, a pretty deep-green colored, closely-fitted chemise of the same Acromantulas-silk.

Harry quietly paid for the purchase out of the galleons from his Gringotts bag. Once he was finished, he said to the two clerks, “I expect that you will both be here in the morning, dressed and ready to open the shop at 10 Am. The transaction should be finished by then. I will send someone I trust to begin the process of redecorating and expansion. Furthermore, I will be quietly putting out the word that the store is looking for another good seamstress / designer. If either of you know of anyone who would work out, there’s a bonus for recruiting the right person.” Harry was dipping heavily into the learning he was doing in his business course and from the things that Daphne had been teaching him, but he wasn’t going to let either Carol or Lindsay know that. He would have to, he knew, go and have an extensive talk with Daphne’s father, before he got into things any more deeply. It wouldn’t do to look stupid in front of his new employees.

Gathering up her bag and slipping on her shoes, Hermione quietly readied herself to head off with Harry to dinner. There were times to take charge and run things and times when sitting back and watching

was better and thanks to her mentor, she was beginning to learn the difference. 'Besides', she thought, 'Harry's doing fine, thank you very much'.

Bidding the two clerks good evening, Harry let Hermione slip her arm around his and the two left the shop; the doorbell ringing quietly behind them as they stepped out into the cool autumn night.

6:20 Pm. Hogsmeade Village; Near Madame Puddifoot's Tea Shoppe.

Brushing the soot off the front of his new pants, Harry looked around and saw Hermione right behind him, doing the same thing to her new school skirt. Floo travel was, at the best of times, dirty and inconvenient. It was like having to bike somewhere on a hot and sticky summers' day if you were a Muggle – because it left you feeling dirty and out-of-sorts.

Once they were reasonably presentable again, Harry looked at his beautiful wife and silently asked her where she wanted to go for dinner. It was getting close to the time when dinner would be served in the Great Hall – and Harry knew they could make it back in time if they hoofed it – but his heart wasn't in doing that and they both knew it.

The sun wouldn't set for another hour or so, but the shadows were already long against the sides of the shops that lined the northern end of Hogsmeade Village. Hermione looked around and tried to decide just how much walking she really wanted to do.

"Let's go somewhere private, Harry. I'm feeling...needy..."

Harry smiled down into his wife's chocolate-brown eyes; reaching up for a moment to sweep away an errant lock of hair from her face before cupping her cheek in his hand. "I'm feeling it too. Seeing you getting fitted....it was everything I could do not to finish stripping you and...."

Hermione groaned at the thought of what he might have done if the circumstances were different and pushed herself against him; rubbing

her sex against his upper leg and feeling his body respond immediately to her need.

“The Inn’s closest to us, love. They have that pub...the one with the booths in back. Shouldn’t be crowded....”

“Now, Harry. I want...”

Harry knew exactly what she wanted and he was determined to give it to her. The booth would give them enough privacy that they could probably satiate at least a couple of their appetites at the same time, if they were discreet. It would be a challenge, but it would also be worth it.

His last really rational thought, as he swept Hermione into his arms and they made their way to the Inn, was that no matter what else happened to him, he would never forget how lucky he was to love such a person as Hermione Jane Potter.

Chapter Seven – “Confrontations and Combinations”

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Note one – I’ve borrowed a name from: Ravenwood240’s story – “The Shades of Grey”. I want to thank him for its use. It can be found at: [fanfiction\(dot\)net/s/3110044/1/Harry_Potter_and_The_Shades_of_Grey](http://www.fanfiction(dot)net/s/3110044/1/Harry_Potter_and_The_Shades_of_Grey) - ravenwood240(at)msn(dot)com

Note two: the nickname “McGonakitty”, as far as I can find, is attributable to the author “Wordhammer” wordhammer (at) comcast (dot) net in his story “Holly Evens and the Spiral Path” fanfiction (dot) net/s/4916690/1/Holly_Evens_and_the_Spiral_Path. If you believe that you or someone you know actually used it first, in the context of a story, please email me. Thank you.

Note Three: There is an adult (lemon) scene between pages 22 and 25. Please skip if that’s not to your taste.

Thursday, September 19th, 1991: Ravenclaw tower, 7th floor – girls’ dorm.

Two important things happened to Harry and Hermione in two days between their adventure in Diagon Alley and Hermione’s twelfth birthday party.

Though she no longer looked 12, but rather 15 or 16, she still wanted to celebrate as if she was still in primary school. It had always been a Granger-family tradition to gather, cook, sing, and celebrate whenever someone in their nuclear or extended family had a birthday and Hermione saw no reason to stop, just because she was attending Hogwarts.

The second important thing that happened was Harry's first encounter with Hermione's parents – which happened at Hermione's request and by way of the Headmaster's help.

It was planned so that both Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall ("McGonakitty", as the older students called her) could be at the gathering, in the event that one or both of the elder Grangers decided to be physically forceful with either Harry or Hermione.

Privately, Hermione thought that her father would acquiesce quickly enough, but she didn't know for sure and wasn't willing to risk it.

At just after 6 pm., Jake and Miranda Granger arrived by portkey in the large staff conference room, just down the hall from the deputy Headmistress's office.

Because they had never traveled by portkey before, they were both momentarily disoriented. Once the room stopped spinning for them and they were able to straighten up and look around – which was, after a fashion, just as unsettling as the portkey ride.

There were three professors with their wands pointing at them and not a single face looked happy to see them. The Headmaster stepped forward and broke the accumulating silence. "Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Granger. You are in a conference room here at Hogwarts Castle. I've invited you here on Hermione Potter's behalf, so that perhaps the three of you can work out any differences you might have."

Jake Granger, no stranger to dangerous situations, looked around the room. He was completely sure that if he did something stupid, he'd be cut down before he took two steps, so he decided that discretion was the better part of valor...at least for the moment. What he didn't see

was his daughter. There were no girls in the room who appeared to be the Hermione he remembered. The taller, almost statuesque girl that he did see was wearing what appeared to be a wedding ring. Miranda saw her as well and reacted by squeezing his hand, hard.

"Tread carefully, love" Miranda very quietly said to her husband. "I don't think we have many friends here."

Hermione, who was standing off to the side holding Harry's hand, saw the look of fear on her parents' faces and wished that circumstances hadn't brought them to this particular point. However, she knew that it wasn't her fault that her parents had reacted so badly. It also hurt that in order to repair the relationship; she was going to have to be the adult, as opposed to her parents.

Easing away from the others, Hermione stepped forward, her hand securely in Harry's and said, "Mom, Dad, welcome to Hogwarts."

Miranda Granger knew the voice. Hermione's voice had always been unmistakable to her...but the body was all wrong. Not wrong really, but just...too old. Too old by more than just a little bit. "Hermione?" she said, tremulously. "Is that you?"

Hermione smiled even though she was shaking inside. There were wands still pointed at the two Muggles, but there was growing certainty and relief that there would not, in fact, be violence in the room after all. "It's me, mom."

For a Muggle, it was much to take in. Miranda swayed in place for a moment and was steadied by Jake Granger. As Hermione's father, he had always thought and believed that it was as much his job as it was his pleasure to protect her and to see to her safety. Looking around, he realized that perhaps the job of protecting Hermione had somehow transferred to those facing him without his knowledge or consent. It was not a terribly happy thought.

Miranda took a tentative step forward; looking like she wanted to hug her daughter. She didn't need to go any further, as Hermione rushed into her arms and hugged her mother hard. Harry didn't move from

where Hermione had left his side, as he didn't want to disturb their reunion or cause them to react negatively.

Once Hermione broke the clinch, she stepped backwards and reaching out, took Harry's hand in hers. 'Albus' and 'Minerva' were watching intently, as were the other professors. They knew that this was the moment that would make or break the meeting.

"Mom? Dad? This is my husband, Lord Harold James Potter, Duke of Westfeld and the Potter Family heir."

Harry looked at them for a moment. He was unsure whether he should try to shake hands with them or simply do the half-bow that Daphne had shown them. After a moment, he did what he had seen his uncle do and extended his hand, first to Hermione's mother and then to her father. "A pleasure to meet you both", he said softly.

Miranda looked him up and down and then said, "Hermione told us that you're her age....but you look like you're 15 or 16. Want to explain?"

Johan Severus Snape eased off the wall that he had been leaning against and moved to a position right behind Harry. The tension in Harry's shoulders eased the moment he felt his mentor's magical aura and his face relaxed, brightening his smile somewhat.

"Lady Granger, I am Johan Snape, Harry's mentor. Here at the school, I teach what you Muggles would call chemistry. We call it 'potions' and it is an art that Harry and Hermione here have picked up quickly and for which they have shown flashes of brilliance. It is with the use of some potions that I have been able to restore Harry to health, after the ten years of abuse and neglect that he suffered at the hands of his Muggle relatives. Those potions had the effect of not only healing him, but aging him somewhat. Physically, Harry is close to being on par with those who are 16. The same is true for your daughter. We have done this because the next seven years of their studies are going to be very, very intense and they will need every advantage we can give them.

Harry here is destined to do great and wonderful things, but he has, to my sadness, some very powerful enemies and they will try to kill him if they can. Because of your daughters' soul-bond with Harry, she also must have the best magical training and the best protections we can provide."

Miranda Granger felt hot tears forming as she surveyed her daughter and the young man who was her husband. The loss of time...time spent raising and guiding her daughter through her formative years...struck her as particularly painful. Turning, she hid her face in Jake's chest and started crying.

The woman who called herself 'Minerva' felt for the young woman. It was always hard to see your child off on some crazy adventure, much less war. It had happened more than a dozen times for her and each time, she swore that she'd never have another child, because the pain of losing him or her was too great. Her last child had died just as the American Civil War was starting and she had cried for several weeks after hearing the news that he had passed on.

Hermione stood for a moment and wondered what to do. She wasn't sure whether her presence was causing her mother more pain than it was worth or if she should try to comfort her the same way that her mother had done for her so many times.

"Go to her, Hermione. She needs you."

Hermione left Harry's side and moved to where she could hug both of her parents. Harry watched as Hermione's father reached out and wrapped a protective arm around her in the same way that he was holding his wife.

The Headmaster nodded to the other professors in the room; signaling to them that things were under control and that it was safe for them to leave. One by one, they filed out, leaving behind the Headmaster, Deputy Headmistress, Harry, Hermione, and her parents. Johan Snape was the last one out and he turned looked at his young Padawan. Harry mouthed the words 'thank you' to him. Johan made a hand gesture that Harry knew meant 'you're welcome' before turning and leaving.

When the door closed and the four adults and two students were left, Albus Dumbledore stepped closer to Hermione and her parents; his wand drawn. "Harry? Would you please call Amrita here, please?"

Harry looked up at the Headmaster, puzzled. "Right now? Here?"

"Yes Harry, here please, right now."

Shrugging, Harry said, "Ok. Everyone might want to step back. She's getting big and I don't want anyone hurt."

Dumbledore nodded and with a 'back-up' gesture, he got Hermione's parents to move backwards, so that they were more or less standing against one wall. Hermione knew better than to be in the way, so she moved next to Harry and took his hand in hers. "Amrita? Can you come to us, please? Right now?"

With his eyes closed, Harry could almost completely feel what Amrita was feeling. She had been curled up on their king-size four-poster bed after a large meal of ferret and chicken. "Coming, master" the Wyvern said sleepily.

In the next moment, Amrita appeared in the middle of the air, above the long, oak conference table. "Where should I land, master?"

"On the table would be fine, Amri. This won't be long."

The now 9-ft. long wyvern gently settled herself down and landed on the table, with her claws retracted, so that she'd not hurt it. Dumbledore sleeved his wand and closed the gap between where he had stood and the table, so that he could touch the resplendent animal. It was clear from his expression that he liked Amrita and wasn't at all threatened by her.

"She's a beautiful animal, Harry. I'm not sure you know how lucky you are."

Harry purposefully did not turn his head, so that Hermione's parents would not suspect anything about Hermione's extraordinary ability to talk to him telepathically. "He doesn't know the half of it, does he?"

"No, I don't think he does, love, and I think we ought to keep it that way" Hermione replied silently.

"I agree, master. I'm no good to either of you if everyone knows all the things that I can do or that we can do together."

"Then we're agreed. We tell no one what the three of us can do or just how close our connects are."

"Agreed" Hermione and Amrita said at exactly the same moment. Hermione broke out in laughter at the funny, coincidental speech. Amrita, if she were capable of laughing, would have. Instead, she snorted and a jet of steam bathed Harry and Hermione in unexpected warmth, even though they were more than ten feet from where Amrita lay.

"Ohhhhhhhhh! That's so nice! Did you know you could do that?"

"No, mistress. That's new, too. I'm going to have to practice that and see how long I can do that and how hard."

"Sounds like fun, Amri." Harry said silently but affectionately.

Dumbledore, for his part, saw the jet of steam and smiled. "Well, well. That was unexpected. I've never seen a Wyvern do that before.

"You mean you've seen animals like this before, Headmaster?" Miranda said, wiping the last of her tears away.

"Yes, Mrs. Granger, I have. Though, I admit, I've never seen one this close up before. Harry's the first student to ever have one as a familiar here on campus. They're marvelous creatures though, don't you think?"

"Are they...dangerous?" she asked.

Taking off his half-moon glasses and wiping them on his chest for a moment, Dumbledore considered her question. "Mrs. Granger? Is a dog dangerous?"

Miranda didn't hesitate. "Sure. Any dog can turn on you and bite you."

"Can a dog kill you?"

"Yes, I suppose...." She said, not quite sure where the conversation was going.

"Well, a Wyvern is a type of dragon, and just like all dragons, they can be dangerous. Is this particular Wyvern dangerous? No, she's not. Her name is Amrita and she is Harry's familiar."

Jake looked at Dumbledore and said..."Sort of like black cats are familiars for certain witches in fantasy books".

"Well, yes. That's it exactly. Except, most witches today don't go in for black cats. They're too cliché. Your daughter shares custody of Harry's owl, Hedwig I believe that she also has come to some kind of understanding with Amrita, so that they at least tolerate each other."

Amrita stretched out her wings a bit and then folded them close to her body, so that she could curl up. At close to four hundred pounds, she was not an inconsequential presence, but she moved so gracefully that Hermione's parents were taken in by her beauty and didn't stop to consider that she might be more than just a pretty pet.

"Mr. and Mrs. Granger, I'm sure that you realize that I didn't ask Harry to call Amrita here for no reason at all and I'm equally sure that you both understand that Hermione here is not the same little girl who left you a note at the beginning of August."

"Your little girl" Minerva McGonagall added, "is vying for first place in all of her classes with her husband. She has extraordinary talent and power and both the Headmaster and I don't feel like we've even begun to see a tenth part of what she's going to be capable of doing in a few years."

“Hermione is a very powerful witch, Mr. Granger” Harry said with some pride. “She does things that amaze everyone, including some who’ve been teaching for a hundred years”

The phrase ‘one hundred years’ stuck in Jake Granger’s mind and eventually found something to connect with. “Just how old are you, Headmaster?”

“Wizards and witches are exceptionally long-lived, Mr. Granger.” Dumbledore said patiently. “My friend, Nicholas Flamel, is not quite seven hundred years old.”

Jake Granger’s mind ran right into a proverbial wall and then stopped; unable to cogitate further. It fell to Hermione’s mother to continue the conversation. “How?”

“Magic, my dear lady. Nicholas discovered how to build a Philosopher’s stone and using it, he and his wife have been able to make the Elixir of Life. You remember stories about the ‘Fountain of youth’?” Miranda nodded. “Well, what Nicholas and Perenelle have is the ‘fountain of life’. So long as they have the Stone, they can choose, or not, to live forever.”

“What does that mean for Hermione?”

It was a question the Headmaster was ready for. “Hermione and Harry, given their innate powers, will probably live over two hundred years, without using the Elixir of Life. If Nicholas chooses, he could help them live well beyond that. I doubt very much, though, that either will want that.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” Hermione’s mother said, not understanding the fundamental problem with immortality.

“Because, Mrs. Granger, with each passing year, you lose those you love to the thing that ravages all of us equally. Eventually, the soul grows weary of being left behind by those whom you love the most and sooner or later, everyone chooses to depart this world and go on to the next great adventure.”

Comprehension came to Jake and Miranda's faces at roughly the same moment and suddenly, they realized that their daughter was just like them, only blessed differently.

Two hours later, after Hermione had reconciled with her parents and explained to them, in as much detail as she was allowed, about the magical world. At the end of the meeting, neither her mother nor her father were completely satisfied, but they left knowing much more about the magical world than they might have ever learned otherwise.

Hermione had been embarrassed by the questions her mother had asked at the end, just a couple of minutes before the portkey was to activate, about her 'activities' with Harry and whether she should worry about being a grandmother anytime soon. Harry had leapt to his wife's defense and told Miranda coldly that his relationship with Hermione was not open to discussion and no, they didn't have plans to have children any time soon. Jake had tried to do the 'I'm-the-father-and-don't-you-mess-with-my-daughter death-glare', but was quickly put in his place when Harry brought his magic to the fore and showed Jake that he could do that too, only better.

Hermione's birthday party kicked off just after 8 pm. and was a great success. Professors Flitwick, Lupin, Vector, Snape, as well as some of the adjunct faculty had pitched in to turn the Great Hall into a dance hall and ice-cream bar, complete with a stage for a live dance-band.

Harry had, with Dobby's help, quietly extended invitations to all of the bonded for the party – which would be held in the Great Hall – after all the older students had gone back to their dorms or to the library to study.

The moment that Hermione entered the hall, everyone gathered around her and began singing to her. When the song finished,

Hermione found herself being passed from person to person and given warm and affectionate hugs.

Harry was the last in line to hug her and did so with all the love and happiness that he felt for her. "I love you, Hermione Potter. Happy twelfth birthday!" he thought to her before he tilted his head and kissed her lovingly.

There were the customary 'ooooows' and 'awwwwws' as Hogwarts' golden couple kissed; causing them both to blush a bit as they separated. It was good-natured and most everyone, including most all of the other bonded, thought that they should be so lucky as to have the confidence to kiss with such love in a public setting. Even Draco and Daphne, who were becoming notorious for their desire for privacy and for how reserved they usually were, loudly applauded their new friends and celebrated Hermione's birthday.

Harry took Hermione in hand and she let herself be swept off to one side of the Great hall, across from the table which had been commandeered for presents. It was piled high and deep with gifts from students and professors alike. Her eyes lit up as she scanned the table. "For me?" she asked across their bond.

"Only for you, 'Mione."

Harry couldn't tell her about the special gifts that he had gotten for her, because they were mostly not for others' viewing. Not that they were bad or scandalous or anything, Harry knew. It was just that they were gifts that he had picked out especially for her and he wanted time to talk to her about them without others around.

As the party progressed, Hermione and Harry danced together, talked with everyone who approached them, and simply enjoyed the togetherness of the moment.

Once or twice, Harry was approached by other boys who thought that throwing a birthday party for their girlfriends or wives, as the case might be, was a great idea and asked him if he could please help them make it as nice as the party that Harry had arranged for Hermione. Each time, Harry responded that he'd love to help and that

if there was anything that they needed, he'd be there for them. That doing so made Hermione that much more proud of him was just a side benefit, Harry thought. He really did like helping others; especially those who were becoming friends of his. It made the feelings of 'aloneness' that he had suffered at his Aunt and Uncles' home seem like they had happened a long time ago, instead of a few short months.

When the party ended, Hermione found that she had help in taking all of her presents up to their dorm. The bonded all wanted to see what she had been given and Hermione was not opposed to sharing; except for Harry's gift of course. That, she knew, she'd get afterwards, when the two of them were alone.

Twenty minutes later, after everyone who could had spilled into the large common room which the bonded shared, Hermione found herself sitting on an elevated wing-back chair, opening presents in front of everyone. There were some duplicates, of course, but by and large, she received curious and often wonderful, fun presents. Parvati and Padma Patil presented her with a finely wrought, heavy 22kt. gold necklace from their home state of Kerala in southern India. SaklaniSubramanian came forward and knelt at Hermione's feet and held up a long, intricately wrapped package. Instinctively, Hermione softly touched the beautiful girls' face and asked her not to kneel before her ever again. "We're friends, Saklani. Please don't treat me like something I'm not."

Hermione thanked her for the gift and then took a moment to converse with Harry silently, asking him to remind her later on to talk to the Patil twins about what Saklani had done.

Turning her attention back to the package in hand, Hermione carefully undid the bow that held it closed and peeled back the layers of ornate silk fabric that surrounded the gift. When the last layer was laid back, Hermione looked at the extraordinary gift that lay on her lap. It was a four-foot long, ornately and intricately carved staff with 1" wide, 22kt. gold bands at either end and in the middle. She could feel the magic radiating from it without even touching it. The moment she

did, a powerful blue glow sprang up around the staff and up her arms. She closed her eyes as the spirit of the elephant that had used the tusk from whence the staff came found her soul worthy and bonded with her magic. Harry felt it, even from where he sat several feet away, and smiled as his wife found yet another way that she was special.

Saklani and her husband, Ken, watched as the birthday-girl felt the staff become a part of her magic. He squeezed her hand and told her silently how much he loved her and admired her for the effort she had made to get that particular gift. He knew it had not been easy, but it had been worth it.

As it was a school night, Lawrence Kettle was 'in the house' and watching from the sidelines, not fully understanding what was happening. Because he wasn't magical, he couldn't see the glow that had engulfed the birthday-girl, nor could he feel the otherwise palpable magic in the room. However, he could read faces and body language – and those skills allowed him to pick up on Hermione's excitement and feelings of elation. As he looked around the room, he wished that he could read some of their thoughts, in the same way that Dumbledore said he could, when he had to do so. He thought that it might give him a better handle on where the students were, emotionally and otherwise.

Cradling the staff in her lap, he saw that Hermione had moved on to other presents and was merrily unwrapping a bag marked "La Petite Coquette". When she finally made her way past the wrappings, she blushed furiously and thanked the trio that had given her the gift. When a chorus of "Show us! Show us! Show us!" began, she tried to demure and then found that she couldn't resist. With Harry at her side, she reached into the bag; taking from it a pair of lacy black knickers. She held them up and there were immediate hoots and hollers and a round of applause from the group, along with several rapid-fire, silent conversations about hoped-for gifts on upcoming birthdays.

Towards the end of the gift-opening, Hermione paused and looked at the large-ish, square-ish box that sat in her lap. Motioning with both hands for everyone to settle down, Hermione said, "This one is from Headmaster Dumbledore." That was enough for everyone to grow

quiet and wait. Carefully, she undid the fine silk bow that held the package together tightly. After undoing the layers of gauzy paper that surrounded the gift, Hermione's eyes grew wide and she ever-so-gently removed a dark golden, Dragon-leather, finely bound book. On the front, embossed in gorgeous black ink, were the words "Hermione Jane Potter" and below them, "Grimoire". She held it aloft, so that everyone could see it. All of the 'pure-blood' children knew immediately what it was: A magical book for Hermione to use to record all of the spells, charms, cantrips, and magical knowledge that she would gain in her lifetime. It would then be passed down to her children, wherein they would do the same thing. The 'Muggle-born' or 'first-born' children all had to be told what the book was, but they too saw the incredible significance of such an item. The enchantments that were necessary to make such a book were long and arduous and required no little skill. Hermione wondered silently, across her bond to Harry, whether the Headmaster had made the book himself or had somehow obtained a new one. It didn't matter either way to Hermione, but she was curious none-the-less.

That she had been given such a book by the Headmaster spoke of his enormous confidence in her and her future magical contributions, both public and private.

Opening the book, Hermione saw a note, inscribed to her. She read it silently to Harry, even as he looked over her shoulder.

September 19, 1991

Dearest Hermione:

I hope that this book tells you how much I believe in you. You are, indeed, the cleverest witch of your age, and I know that you will find uses for this book.

I have enchanted it so only you and those you consider family can read it. You will need to put one drop of your blood on the spine of the book, just above the star so that the book is permanently bound to you. If you choose to share the book with Harry, he will need to do the same thing. Your children will automatically have access to it.

Congratulations on your twelfth birthday.

Warmest regards,

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

Harry smiled at the note. Even though he felt as though there were things that the Headmaster was still not telling them, it still felt good to know that the Headmaster saw Hermione the way Harry did.

“The Headmaster likes you, Hermione. He’d not have gone to the efforts he did if he didn’t”.

“I know, love. It’s a wonderful gift!”

Hermione would have continued to dwell on the magical book she had been given if there wasn’t another professors’ gift to receive. A small, dark blue and silver-felt lined box was brought to Hermione by one of the third-year boys. Charlie something-or-other was his name and he looked at Hermione with wide, not quite fearful eyes. Hermione saw the look and reached out to touch his hand. “Thank you, Charlie. That’s really sweet of you”.

The young man – who’s best known features were an out-of-control mop of sandy blond hair and a ready smile – said “you’re welcome, Lady Potter” and then quickly retreated.

She might have bristled at being addressed by her title if Harry hadn’t been there to calm her with a touch. “It’s all right, ‘Mione. Some are just a little afraid, because they don’t know us well enough. We can change that, though.”

It was true, she knew, and so she settled down and bent herself to the task of opening the package that lay on her lap. Almost immediately, she knew who had sent it, because there was a small, purring tabby-cat resting on the bow. Smiling to herself, Hermione stroked the animated figurine’s back and it rose and then stretched out, before moving off the bow.

Pulling one end of the bow free, she undid the knot and then worked the loosened string towards one end of the package. Once the string was off, Hermione was able to open the box.

Inside lay two 250 ml. vials that looked like they contained a grayish, viscous gravy. To one side, a note was tucked, sealed with the Deputy Headmistresses' personal, magical seal: a red wax cat.

Hermione slipped the note free and opened it using McGonagall's favorite password: "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty"

The note sprang open of its own volition.

September 19, 1991

Dearest Hermione:

The Headmaster is indeed right. You are the smartest witch of your age and it is my great pleasure to give you this gift. These two vials contain enough of the transfiguration potion for you and your husband to undergo the animagus transformation when you are ready. Do not open them right now. They are being held under stasis and will remain viable so long as they are not opened.

Come and find me after the term ends and I will teach you both how to begin the meditative process that will help you find your tokens – the ones that will lead you both to your respective forms.

Congratulations on reaching your 12th birthday. I am very proud of you.

Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

There was, finally, one gift to go and it was from Harry's mentor, Johan. Hermione took it from Harry's own hands and trembled as she contemplated what it might be. It too was a box fashioned much the same way as the one from her mentor, but it was matte-black and felt almost slippery to the touch. There was no bow nor was there any

immediate locking mechanism. Hermione was stumped. That was, until Harry tapped it with his finger and said, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good". That caused a seam to run all around the edge; giving Hermione a place to insert a fingernail and gently pry it open.

There were a dozen vials of various colors nestled snugly in place. Both Hermione and Harry could feel powerful magics resonating from all of them and they wondered what she or they had just been given. There were calls around the room for Hermione to share what she was looking at, so she turned the box around and let everyone see the vials. There were nods of approval as well as 'ooooows' and 'ahhhhhhs' at the mysterious, yet obviously magical gift. Like the other two, there was a note. It was in Johan's tight, compact script.

September 19, 1991

Dearest Hermione:

Congratulations on your 12th birthday. You have exceeded my greatest hopes. I know that my dearest Lily was brilliant, but I think, at long last, I have found someone who is more so. You make me proud. Of course, I could not be happier for Harry. He has found in you someone to love and treasure and that is why I am giving you this gift.

I have, with the Headmasters' help, made four vials of the Elixir of Life – two for each of you. You will know when you need to use it. God willing, you will not need it for several hundred years, I have also collected two vials of Felix Felicis. They will give you luck when you are at your darkest, most awful moment. I pray that that moment never comes, but Riddle will return and when he does, it will be terrible for all of us.

Two of the vials are to be handled with greatest care, for they contain Acromantula venom. There is no antidote, other than a bezoar, for the venom. Again, you'll know when to use it.

Two of the vials contain liquid Fiend Fyre. It is uncontrollable once released, so I beg you to be careful with it. Thank Harry for its creation. He was the one who discovered the secret to making it.

Finally, Hermione, I have obtained the rarest of all items: two vials of willingly given Unicorn Blood. It is the only substance in the world that can bring back the dead. YOU MUST NOT SHOW THIS TO ANYONE. These two vials are literally more precious than all the gold in Gringotts. Wars have been fought over less than this. I give it to you now because I don't know what the future will bring and you have to be ready for it.

All of the vials are protected by stasis fields. They will last forever, or until you need them.

God bless, Hermione, and Happy Birthday.

Johan Severus Snape

Hermione sat, stunned at what she had been given. Closing the cover, she told Harry that she had to make sure that it was safe. "But where, love?" Harry asked, across their bond.

"We'll have to shrink it and carry it with us, always. It's the only way. Gringotts can be robbed, if you have the power, and I don't dare put it in my trunk. That can be picked up and carried away."

"What if you wear it on a necklace? Like a locket of some kind?"

She immediately smiled as she realized how simple Harry's suggestion was. "That's brilliant, Harry. No one would ever guess."

"I'll distract everyone here. Go to our suite and do it there. Then come back and we can dance and have cake, ok?"

"I'll be back then, love. It shouldn't take very long. I love you."

"Love you too, now go."

Hermione disappeared in the blink of an eye, just like Dobby had taught them the day before, as his personal birthday gift to Hermione. Draco and Daphne smiled. They were the only other ones whom Dobby had been willing to teach, so they knew that Hermione had just 'popped' away. There was a huge, collective intake of breath as

all the other students saw Hermione apparently 'disapparating' within the walls of Hogwarts: something they just knew to be impossible.

There was a great clamoring of voices as everyone tried to ask Harry how Hermione had just suddenly 'disappeared'. He smiled and said, "Like this" and disappeared as well. The next moment, he reappeared on the other side of the room, looking self-satisfied.

The Weasley twins looked particularly jealous and made a beeline to where he stood. "How did"

"You do that?"

The twins asked, in their typical twin-speak mode. Harry grinned. "An elf taught me and a few others how to do it. It's simple, really. It's just that I'd never, ever thought of doing it the way that they suggested."

"Can you"

"Teach us too?"

Shaking his head, Harry said, "I'm sorry, guys. I made an unbreakable promise that I never would teach anyone else. Hermione and I and two others know the secret and that's it."

The twins looked crestfallen at the words, "Unbreakable promise". It would mean Harry's life to violate the promise and he knew that the secret wasn't valuable enough to be willing to make that sacrifice.

A moment later, Hermione returned. This time, however, she made her entrance the normal way; entering the hall from a stairway that led down from the upper balcony.

Harry noticed that she had changed clothes as well. She was now wearing a very short, tan silk mini-skirt and black silk top. The outfit, complete with heels, emphasized her long legs and tight, sexy figure. Harry could feel the blood rushing south to his bits and his pants growing tight.

She saw him from across the room and smiled. “I’m wearing the tiny white knickers you like so much, love, and I’m not wearing a bra.”

Harry groaned. “You’re trying to kill me, right? You know I can’t resist you”

Hermione giggled as she made her way back across the room to him and soon they were in each others’ arms, kissing. It would have been a lot worse or at least much more mortifying if they weren’t surrounded by bonded couples, who took their embrace as an excuse to do some snogging of their own.

It was a great way, Hermione thought, to end a party.

57 Mill Lane, Nonington-in-Kent, Kent, UK – Just after 8 Am, Sept. 20, 1991

Miranda Granger was awake and motivated after seeing her daughter the night before. There were several things she wanted to accomplish during their first day off. Miranda walked into her only daughter’s room and looked about. She hadn’t spent any time cleaning the room at all since Hermione had left and she thought it was probably overdue for an overhaul. The first thing that had to be done was that the bed needed to be stripped and the sheets sent through the laundry.

As she pulled off the down comforter and removed the heavy cotton blanket beneath it, she thought about what her daughter was doing at that precise moment. She hoped that her only child – the little girl whom she loved so much and who had filled her days with happiness as she was growing up – was herself content and happy.

By pulling the cotton top-sheet away, she exposed the pile of pillows that lay at the head of the European double-bed. Deciding that the pillow cases ought to be changed out too, she began with the pillow nearest her and worked her way towards the ones that lay against the wall. She picked up the final pillow and as she did so, she gasped.

Laying on the bed were a small book that looked like the diary that she had given Hermione several years previously and next to it...the small, white vibrator that she thought she had lost the year before.

Picking it up, she looked at it and then twisted the base, to turn it on. It began vibrating weakly, as if the batteries had been well-used already.

Tucking the toy in her pocket, she turned her interest to the small book. Opening it, she looked at the inside front cover. It said: "Property of Hermione Jane Granger, September 1, 1990"

She started leafing through the pages. All of them were in Hermione's neat, precise script. As she began to read, she realized that she was invading her daughters' privacy, but was too curious to stop.

One entry caught her eye. It was marked 'September 17, 1990'.

Dear Diary:

Hah! I got it! I thought Mom would never put it down somewhere I could find it, but she did. It's awesome! I tried it last night and it felt SO good! It was just like the book said. Even though I left my knickers on, I could feel it working on my bits. Now I know why Mom likes it so much! I thought about trying to put it inside, but then I realized that I really want to keep my virginity until I get married.

Miranda didn't know what to think. On one hand, she was glad that her only daughter was beginning to develop sexually and that she had decided to keep her virginity until she was married. Then she realized that Hermione WAS married, for all intents and purposes. That was what being bonded was, wasn't it?

As she stewed about that, and the fact that Hermione had, essentially, absconded with her favorite vibrator, she pushed on and started reading the next entry.

Sept. 30, 1990

Dear Diary:

OMG, OMG, OMG!!!! Tonight, I snuck down towards my parents' room and watched them. I'm positive that they didn't know I was there. I snuck in and watched. It was amazing! Mommy was on her hands and knees on the bed and Daddy was behind her. I thought they were making love at first (that's what it looks like in the book), but then Mommy said to Daddy, "Fuck my arse, Jake! Do me!" She looked so happy! I couldn't believe that Daddy was putting his cock in Mommy like that, but she kept saying how good it felt and he did too, so I had to come back and read the book some more.

Once I read the book, I understood what was going on. Daddy WAS making love to Mommy – it was just different. I didn't know that adults did that, but they do, and apparently it feels good. Someday, maybe, I'll try it....that is, if I ever find a boy who likes me.

I'm going to watch some more....whenever I can....it was amazing!

Miranda thought back to that night and she did, very fondly, remember Jake taking her that way and she remembered how very, very good it had felt. As she thought about it, she felt her cheeks flush and her nipples harden. She was embarrassed that Hermione had seen them...very embarrassed, actually, but she was also kind of proud that Hermione had not reacted badly. Instead, she had returned to her room and looked up what she had seen and tried to understand it. Smiling, Miranda looked over and saw the copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by the Boston Women's Health Consortium sitting on the second shelf of her daughter's bookcase. Dog-eared and well-worn, it looked like her daughter had all but tried to consume it. It had been an expensive book, because it was printed in the States and had to be shipped over especially for Hermione, but it had also been worth every quid that she had spent.

"In for a pence, in for a pound", Miranda thought, as she read the next entries, each steamier than the last. Some talked about her private fantasies while others were just...she didn't know how to describe them. "Hot" seemed so wrong, yet there was really no other way to say it.

Finally, one entry particularly caught her eye. It was dated October 21st.

October 21, 1990

Dear Diary: I dreamed of him again last night! I was feeling scared, after Milly and her friends ganged up on me after lunch today, and somehow, in my dream, he came and rescued me. His black hair was wild, like he hadn't ever combed it and his eyes were that impossible green that you can't even describe. He took me away from them and then kissed me; telling me how much he loves me and needs me to be with him.

I don't know how many times I've dreamed of him, but it's like he's out there for me, somewhere, looking for me and wanting me to be a part of his life forever. I know he's the one for me, just like Mom and Dad were always meant for each other. I hope that my marriage is as good as theirs!

Miranda almost dropped the book in shock as she realized that Hermione really had been telling the truth when she had said that she had been dreaming about Harry for a very long time and that it had felt like he was out there for her, somewhere, looking for her and wanting to protect her.

She realized that she was not going to be able to hide it from Jake and that in any event, she shouldn't. Secrets were not good between husband and wife and they had always had a pact that no matter what, they'd trust each enough to share everything, good or bad.

Miranda finished cleaning the room – straightening up Hermione's desk, organizing the miscellaneous knickknacks, and putting the books back that had been left in a pile at the foot of the bed. By the disorder of the room, Miranda realized that Hermione must not have been back to pack, but rather had gone straight on to Hogwarts after shopping for her school things. It also explained why the vibrator and diary had been left behind. Hermione was not so careless as to have left two things which were so important to her, behind where her mother could find them.

Looking around, she realized that her work was just about done for the moment. She needed to dust and vacuum the room a bit, but it was otherwise fine. Picking up the sheets and pillow-cases from the floor, Miranda wondered if Hermione would ever again sleep in the room that had sheltered and protected her for almost eleven years. She hoped that her 'baby girl' would come back at some point, if only to visit. Despite her dramatic exit, Miranda loved her very, very much and missed her more than she could express. The house was far too quiet for her liking.

Jake Granger sat at his favorite table – the one overlooking the pond in the lower back yard. He could see a Grey Heron working one edge of the pond, looking for frogs or other things to eat, while at the other side, a Little Egret was doing the same thing. He could hear a Cetti's warbler, with its occasional loud burst of song, and a Dartford warbler, with its almost house-wren type song, calling from somewhere in the reeds or low scrub bushes that ran along the back edge.

The house itself was oriented roughly east to west, so that the back of the house always caught the morning sun, leaving the living room, front hall, and all of the gardens out front to catch the afternoon sun. Miranda's roses loved the warmth, as did all of the fruit trees that she had planted along either side of the driveway over the years.

Morning was an excellent time, Jake thought, for going over the business' records. Because they worked most all Saturdays, in order to convenience those patients who couldn't make visits during the week, they took both Fridays and Sundays off – something not allowed by NHS rules. Being outside of the National Health System had its distinct advantages.

He had just gotten down to looking at their P & L records for the proceeding two quarters and saw that costs were up a little bit, but their profits were up a lot, because of the changes they had instituted to their overall employ pay packages. They had entered into a self-sustaining, private dental insurance pool that gave all of their employees access to a group of dental professionals outside their own practice (because being worked on by your own boss was not

kosher, in terms of medical privacy rules).

For each employee, they paid into a communal fund, each month, at a rate that was 30% lower than what the NHS demanded, and it provided to each, including all of the dentists and dental surgeons, benefits that were better than anything that they could obtain via the NHS.

Additionally, because they were a part of the communal fund, their overall insurance liability had been reduced by 20%, as Lloyd's figured that better coverage for less money equaled less overall business risk.

Jake worked with pen and paper, as he had been taught to do in the SAS and, after a quick lookup of the average exchange rate between pound Sterling and the US dollar for the first six months of the year, figured that for the first half of the year, their income, after taxes and reinvestments, was up by £ 135,000 or \$243,974.25. That was over and above what he had originally estimated it to be the prior fall.

He smiled. A quarter-million dollars was a lot of money, no matter how you looked at it, and Jake was extremely pleased. If they kept up that pace, he knew that he and Miranda would be able to retire by the time he was 45 or 50 and have a very long, happy retirement together, anywhere in the world that they chose to go.

A shadow crossed the table and Jake turned to look at the source. It was his beautiful wife and she wasn't wearing anything at all. It took about 0.02 seconds for the blood to start pooling somewhere south of his waist - somewhere where it could do them both good.

"Hello, love" he said, as she moved to stand next to him. Her eyes were twinkling and he could tell that she was very happy to see him, given that her nipples were small, almost diamond-hard points and she was flushed all over.

"Hello yourself, handsome" she said, in her best, most seductive voice.

“I can see you’re happy to see me” he said, as he captured her left nipple gently between his teeth. Moaning, she pushed her breast into his mouth as much as she could; reveling in the feeling.

Jake turned in his chair, just so, and slowly, languidly, brought a free hand up her inside thigh; finally stopping when his knuckles brushed the wet lips of her sex. The statuesque, beautiful woman ran insistent fingers through his hair and pulled his mouth hard to her body as she felt wave after wave of pleasure from his touch. There was no one around, in any direction to see him run his hands further between her legs. Even Miranda didn’t see his smile of surprise when his fingers encountered the hard end of the glass toy that was seated in her arse, but she did feel his tongue lashing her nipple and his fingers twist and turn the plug in her bottom.

“I want your cock in my arse, Jake. Now.”

That caused him to back off her breast and look up into the hungry, smoky eyes of his wife. She smiled down at him, even as he stood up and dropped the terry cloth bathrobe that covered his otherwise hard, naked body.

Her need was feral as she turned to face away from him; her hands resting on the desk that he loved. “Right here, Jake. Fuck me!”

Just like her sisters, Miranda’s arse was a thing of beauty. Trim, tight, smooth as silk, and without a trace of cellulite or muscle degradation, she was as well put together as any supermodel, anywhere in the world. The difference was that Miranda was also smarter than her sisters, which was saying quite a lot, given all of their advanced degrees, and for him, she was as loving and gentle as a woman could be.

Jake clutched her hips, only to draw both hands down and over her arse and then down her legs. He reversed direction only when she wiggled her arse at him and repeated her demand that he fuck her arse hard.

Drawing the plug out of her bottom slowly and teasingly, Jake Granger marveled at the luck that had brought the two of them

together and gave thanks to whichever gods cared that he had the chance to love her in this lifetime.

She arched her back and pressed her arse at him; trying to get him to touch her more intimately. Grinning at her growing need and growing frustration, Jake brought two fingers up between her spread legs, caressed her clit and then plunged both into her incredibly tight, wet sex.

She gasped, "Oh god, Jake! YES! Oh God, oh God....don't stop!"

Leaning over her body, he plunged his fingers into her again and again, drawing out every bit of pleasure for her that he could.

Moaning and pushing back against him and his insistent, unrelenting fingers, she was caught up in the pleasure of the moment; unable to form coherent words as her husband showed her just how much he loved and desired her. It was almost what she wanted.

Soon, waves of orgasm crashed through her system; overwhelming her senses and causing her sex to tighten again and again around her loving husband's fingers. It was what she loved, he knew, but he also knew that she wasn't nearly done and he wanted, more than anything, to be inside her when he came.

"Do my arse! DO ME!" she begged him the moment she had a cogent thought, even as he withdrew his fingers. Jake was all too happy to comply. The sun was warm on both of them as he moved behind her fully and in one thrust, buried himself deep in her sex. She tried to say something, but it came out as an unintelligible moan as he rocked in and out of her.

Finally slipping out of his wife's clutching sex, Jake aligned his erection with her arse and ever so gently pushed forward, until he felt resistance. It took another half a minute's effort before he was all the way inside her. Miranda was panting and moaning at the same time, gripping the desk as she felt her bottom invaded by her husband's powerful, stone-hard cock. She had been nervous the first time they had 'done the deed', but that was years ago and since then, she had grown to truly love the feeling of her arse being filled by him.

Closing his eyes, Jake savored the feeling of being one with the wife he loved so much. She was giving herself to him in a wholly intimate, wonderful way and he was glad that she was both so adventurous and so desiring of his touch.

“That’s it, Jake” she said between breaths. “Fuck me! Cum in me!” Gripping her hips, Jake pulled himself forward; driving his cock all the way into her and feeling every inch of his cock caressed by the muscles of her arse.

Neither one of them was going to last long. Miranda was too worked up by her husbands’ previous ministrations while he was completely overwhelmed by the incredible sensory overload that he always experience when they coupled. It was her perfume; the silkiness of her skin; the tightness of her body, and the eroticism of making love to her on their covered, but otherwise open 2nd story porch that got to him as much as anything else.

Miranda gave out a cry of purest pleasure as Jake reached around her and slipped his right hand down and into her sex, stroking her clit. Her climax hit like a bolt of lightning and she convulsed; inducing his own thunderous orgasm and sending jet after jet of his seed deep into her body.

He would have slipped out of her and fallen backward if he hadn’t been holding onto her as he was; such was the wave of pleasure that he felt from their love-making. Instead, he leaned forward and captured her whole body with his; wrapping his hands around her from behind and holding her close, so that he could kiss the back of her neck and let his breathing settle, before trying to move anywhere.

“That was...awesome, love” he said to her softly as he pressed his face against her back.

“Oh God, Jake...it felt so good!” she said, turning her head so that she knew she’d be heard by him.

They stayed couple for several additional minutes, until he slipped out of her and they both felt the need for a warm shower.

As they walked towards their bedroom, Jake asked her what had brought on the sudden bout of passion and she told him about finding the diary and what it had said. At first, he was mortified that his daughter had seen him naked and rutting with her mother, but then he thought about it and about the fact that Hermione had not made that many comments about them directly, other than saying that she thought they were both beautiful and deserved each other. What stayed with him as they slipped into the shower and began lathering each other was the fact that like her mother, Hermione had immediately retreated to the safety of a dispassionate book to better inform her curiosities. It was a good trait, he thought, if not carried to the extreme.

After showering and toweling each other dry, Jake and Miranda sat together and read all of the entries in Hermione's diary and discussed what they thought was going on in her head as the entries were written and how those things reflected on what had happened to her since she had gone off to Hogwarts. Their one worry, if they had one, was that Hermione had gone from being a 12-yr. old child to an almost-16 yr. old in the course of a month. Both knew enough about child psychology from their medical training to know that without the proper supervision, that might very well be a horrendous, completely disorienting transition for her and for her husband.

Neither could know that magic had funny and unpredictable ways of coping with such changes and that the Headmaster knew a great deal more than he was telling them.

Zimni Odmor; near the eastern border of Albania, Friday, Sept. 20th; early evening

Quirinus Quirrell wondered, not for the first time, just what in the hell he was doing in such a run-down, god-awful place such as Zim ni Odmor. Practically a stone's throw from the western Macedonian border, there was nothing to recommend the place...except the fact that there had been consistent rumors that a terrible, awful spirit had taken to inhabiting the snakes in the area. Defense against the Dark

Arts was Quirinus' specialty and so, like a moth to a flame, he had decided to make the incredibly arduous trip into the god-forsaken backwaters of this third-rate, not-quite-failed, just-post-Stalinist European country to see if he could find, trap, and transport the spirit back to the Hague, where his brethren in the magical, Pan European confederacy were based.

Quirinus did not expect that he'd be in a run-down, Albanian bar, trying to choke down food that he was almost sure wasn't completely edible, and wash it down with potato vodka that was of questionable quality at best. He wished that he had stayed in Buzet instead of coming to the forsaken frontier area near the border. God knew, he could have used the rest...especially since he had just finished the last requirements for his second mastery.

He was just finishing the last of the semi-edible food on his plate when he was suddenly stunned from behind by a man whom he had failed to hear enter the restaurant. Peter Pettigrew was extremely nervous as he raised his wand and stunned the older wizard...but he needn't have been. Quirinus never saw it coming because, like a fool, he had sat at what passed for a bar, with his back to the door. Constant Vigilance was a lesson completely lost on him.

Peter, as he floated the man's body out the back door, flipped a couple of coins to the bar-keep and even managed a very polite thank you to the man in passingly good Albanian.

For Quirinus, ordering the meal of lamb, beans, brown-bread, and room-temperature vodka was the last time that he'd ever be able to make a rational, conscience choice of his own again.

As the two British-born wizards disappeared into the quickly approaching darkness, the younger, shabbier wizard thought that he might have, for once, done something bordering on good for his master and that he might, if he was lucky, have a chance to go into a real town and enjoy a real meal.

It was optimistic in the extreme....but a man had to have hope, didn't he?

Chapter Eight – “Capture and Reward”

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CONTENT Disclaimer: This story may contain sexually graphic and explicit material and it is not suitable for minors. If you are a minor, please leave now, as it is illegal for you to be here. If it is illegal for you to read or view sexually explicit material in the community you view such material, please leave now. This story and characters are purely fictional and any resemblance to events or persons (living or dead) is purely coincidental. If you are offended by sexually explicit stories, please read no further. These stories are just that, stories, and may or may not reflect the opinions of the author.

NOTE ONE: This ENTIRE chapter is courtesy of my fabulous beta and very great friend, Margie19142. She suggested the plotline and the details and all I did was flesh it out a bit. It's another reason that I depend on her so much.

NOTE TWO: I know that I've explained this before, but I will say it again: the general rule is that bonded couples share everything. What one partner knows, the other knows as well. Some bonded couples can share only feelings and thoughts while the more powerful ones can share the full range of mental abilities: thoughts (including occlumency against outside intrusion), feelings, memories, images (including being able to see what the other is seeing), and intuition. The bonded couples ALL dream together – so what scares one during a 'nightmare' might scare both or neither. Conversely, erotic dreams are shared, which makes for very, very sexually satisfied couples (among older couples that are fully bonded). Younger

couples also go through much less trauma about sexual identity and the meaning behind their sometimes raging sexual desires (hormone storms) because of their bonds.

One more thing: IN THIS ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE, Bonded couples CANNOT perform legilimency. My argument for this is that it is precluded by the telepathy that they already share with each other. I know that I've already shown 'Dumbledore' as being bonded and having performed legilimency, but he's NOT FULLY HUMAN (well, not even half human, actually) and "Minerva" is special for different reasons...so my argument still holds. PLEASE don't flame me on this point. This is MY AU and I'm sticking with my set-up.

From Chapter Seven – “Confrontations and Combinations”

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It was optimistic in the extreme....but a man had to have hope, didn't he?

October 1, 1991 – The Bonded Dorm Common Room, just after dinner

Draco Greengrass was sitting comfortably in one of the really plush “couples” chairs that had been pushed in front of the fireplace, with his beautiful wife on his lap.

Harry and Hermione were sitting the same way, in the chair opposite to them. The conversation had gone on ever since the four had left the Great Hall after dinner about how things were going and what each expected to happen in the coming months.

The conversation was going on just fine when Harry, who wanted to write something down, reached out his hand and silently, wandlessly summoned his book-bag from across the room. Draco looked at him, his mouth agape.

Daphne voiced the surprise, and awe, she knew her husband was thinking and feeling. “When did you learn to do that, Harry?”

As Harry rifled through his bag one-handed, which was made harder with Hermione sitting on his lap, he said, “Well... it’s been kind of... a bit at a time, really. The wandless bit has been coming along ever since we started lessons this summer. Dumbledore really wanted us to be able to do it from the beginning. I didn’t get very far...hang on...” Harry fished out parchment finally and then took the pen that his wife proffered. Once he had written down the list that he had been quietly building in his head all evening, Harry turned his attention back to his friends. “It really got going for me once I finished the growth potions. It’s like that uncorked something for me.”

“That’s SO not fair, Harry!” Draco said, almost defensively, as if he felt ashamed that he was not at Harry’s level, even though they were the same age.

Harry’s eyes fell immediately. Harry really liked both Daphne and Draco and was sad that he had brought up the whole subject. He knew, after a fashion, that it wasn’t fair that he and Hermione were physically four to five years ahead of their peers in terms of physical development and that their magic was, as a result, that much stronger than any of the students around them (of the same chronological age). “It’s not your fault, love” Hermione said to him silently.

“Why not? If it weren’t for me, we’d not be in this situation?”

“Be real, Harry. The only reason that Johan gave the potion was because you had been starved by your ‘uncle’. It’s NOT YOUR FAULT!”

Harry winced. Hermione’s opinion rang very, very loudly in his head and it caused him to retreat a little bit, at least mentally. “Ok, ok....so it’s not my fault. It still feels that way. Draco and Daphne have been really good to us and I feel like I’m letting him down.”

It was Hermione’s turn to wince a little bit. She knew exactly what Harry was feeling and knew why as well, and it made her feel guilty that she might be leaving some of her best friends behind, magically. She thought that Harry also had a point; that it was their responsibility to support their friends, if they could.

Draco, fortunately, came to their rescue by asking the question that was waiting to be asked. “Could you two get me, get us, some of whatever it was that Johan gave you?”

Harry’s eyes lit up and Hermione could feel his excitement. Suddenly, Harry had hope – or at least something to do. It was exactly what he needed in order to get past his momentary funk.

“Johan made it for us... so he either made just enough or there’s more where ours came from. If he made more than enough...”

Draco started nodded. He knew exactly – or at least hoped that he knew – what Harry was thinking. “Thinking of ‘liberating’ some of it?”

Not being able to keep himself from grinning, Harry said “Yup. If we are lucky, there should be more than enough for you and Daphne, and maybe a few others...”

Even Daphne seemed excited. The prospect of gaining a few years of growth practically overnight was very appealing – not least because she’d finally have a body that she was proud of showing off, instead

of the almost reed-thin, prepubescent boy's body that she thought she had. "When?" Draco asked, his excitement almost palpable.

That got Harry thinking fast and furiously. Draco and Daphne watched in amazement as both Hermione and Harry then closed their eyes and started to glow as they held each other more tightly.

"What's happening, Draco?"

"They're talking, just like we do...only somehow their magic is helping them."

For several long minutes, Draco and Daphne sat and watched as Harry and Hermione's magical aura glowed and pulsed; sometimes in coruscating, brilliant colors and sometimes in just bright golden-yellow. "I wonder what my father would say if he could see this. He has always been banging on about how 'blood-purity' makes our family superior. I mean....seriously. They're so powerful that it makes my father laughable."

"Your father's just a bastard and a bigot, Draco, in the worst sense of those words. His opinions don't matter any more. Only yours matter to me."

Draco felt the intense love and warmth behind his bonded mate's statement and it caused him to feel the kind of warmth and happiness that he had always wanted to feel from his parents but had never experienced. "I love you too, Daph."

"I know, love. I always have."

The minutes continued to tick by and eventually, Draco gave up watching his unmoving friends. Rather than resisting the seductive pull of his bond with Daphne, gave into it and let himself fall into the warm pool which was the way that he privately visualized their merged magic. Sharing magic is intensely personal and there was no way that he would ever try to describe the experience to anyone else...not even the Headmaster or Harry and Hermione. Externally, both Daphne and Draco seemed unchanged; except for the fact that their heart rates had slowed by more than a third and their breathing

slowed to match it. His hands had made their way under the back of her shirt just as hers had done, so that they could both be touching bare skin.

Once or twice, Professor Kettle stopped by to check on those in the common room; making a casual circle around the room and talking to anyone who seemed interested in engaging him in conversation. The first time that he saw the two bonded couples, he thought it best to 'wake them up' and tried to do so by roughly shaking Harry's shoulder, only to be stopped by one very, very large and menacing-looking wyvern that suddenly appeared in front of him in a blaze of fire. Not having any idea what to do when confronted by a small dragon, he wisely retreated; ignoring the raucous laughter at his expense as he left the room. The second time he made his rounds, he kept a respectable distance from the two couples; only pausing to do a visual inspection that he thought assured him that nothing 'improper' was going on. He did not know that even if there had been something 'improper' going on, his chances of preventing it from occurring were non-existent and would have, in any case, probably resulted in his being physically hurt. Magic is jealous of its prerogative and doesn't brook interference lightly.

More than an hour after Draco gave up 'Harry and Hermione watching', both couples seemed to simultaneously leave their bond-trance. All of them seemed extraordinarily happy and the chatter from the other couples around the room seemed to increase a bit as both couples stood and then did a four-way hug. "Got your issues fixed, Harry?" Draco asked quietly, as the group stood close together.

"Yea, I think Hermione and I worked it out." Harry said happily.

"Good. Daphne and I started to worry when you two went all rainbows on us and your auras merged."

Hermione snorted at that. She'd never heard a more apt description of the peculiar effect that magical merging had on an individuals' aura. "Too bad we can't see it in a mirror when it's happening" she thought to him.

Harry silently agreed with her. "I'd like that, too. Bet your parents would like it as well. Maybe we can do that for them, someday."

The idea of doing it in front of her parents was both embarrassing and exhilarating at the same time. Embarrassing on the one hand because she knew that the 'rainbow effect' was a physical manifestation of her intense feelings of love for Harry and his for her and exhilarating on the other because it might be a chance for her to 'show off' her magic at home without fear of the Ministry's owls coming in the window.

As if there was some kind of instantaneous, silent agreement, the group moved almost as one, towards a large, leather-covered sectional sofa that sat in the middle of the room and then collapsed onto it. They sat closer together than was normal for couples, but no one else in the room noticed or cared, so their physical proximity went unremarked.

Harry spoke first, once they were all settled and comfortable. "Draco, Daphne – Hermione and I have decided to go after the potion as soon as we can. We both doubt that Johan has warded against house-elves – which means..."

"Which means that if you know where it is...you can go get it with him none the wiser."

"Exactly"

"When?"

"I don't know. Probably on Saturday night, when he's out of the castle. I know that he's not expected back until Monday and that will give us plenty of time to get the potion, give everyone their dosages, and get the cauldron back into place with a fake potion in it. If that doesn't work, we'll just have to think of another way. I know that it's at least a seventh-year potion, so the ingredients for it are restricted. He stores those ingredients in a warded safe of some kind, somewhere in his private lab. Neither Hermione nor I think that we have a hope in hell of getting anywhere near it, even with what Dobby taught us."

“That’s probably right, actually. Johan is smart. My father even complained that he couldn’t muscle Johan out of the way in order to be the dork lord’s one and only favorite because Johan knew too much and was too valuable to be disrespected openly by the other death-eaters. After you did in the dork lord Harry, they kept meeting at the Manor and as I got older, I spied on some of the meetings. Johan was always there, as was my father” Draco’s disgust as he said ‘father’ was obvious. He paused a moment before continuing. When he went on, he was somewhat more subdued. “I saw the things that they did when they captured female Muggles in the area. Those were the meetings that made me understand that I could never, ever be what my father wanted me to be.”

Hermione reached over and put her hand on Draco’s arm in a very reassuring way and he brightened as he felt its warmth. His eyes flashed at her and said, “Thanks”, even though he didn’t say it out loud.

“We’re glad you’re here, Draco, and I’m glad that you’re our friend – my friend. A lot’s happened in the last two months, and I think we’re all happier because of it. I know that I am.”

“Got that right” Hermione said; voicing the happiness that she knew she wasn’t alone in feeling.

“So, all we have to do is go nick some potion and then start figuring out what we have to do next for classes. No problem.”

Draco snorted. “That’s easy for you to say, Harry. Some of us have to actually work for our grades.”

“Oh ya...right, Draco. Remind me again who’s vying for first in DADA? That little stunt you pulled, sneaking into the Headmaster’s office right behind the Headmaster himself and pouring that potion onto his lemon drops without him knowing you were ever there? That was brilliant.” Harry couldn’t deny that he was tops in at least some of his classes, along with Hermione, but he wasn’t about to come out and start blabbing about it, either. It would make Draco feel bad and that was something that Harry definitely did not want to do.

Draco smiled a smile of immense satisfaction as he remembered the incident. It had happened four days after Hermione's birthday and it was still being talked about all over the school. The Headmaster's clothes and beard had turned violently pink for three solid days, no matter what he did to try to change it, and it had already been credited with being the first successful prank against the Headmaster since the days when Harry's father had been in school. It had also earned in an O+ for the entire week in his and Daphne's DADA class. Even Johan had been forced to give him full marks for creating such a potent, persistent potion/dye combination. Only Minerva had had anything negative to say about it and even her commentary had been muted.

No one, save for Draco himself, Daphne, Harry, Remus Lupin, and Hermione knew that the real success and the thing that should have earned him even more credit was the fact that he had snuck into the Headmaster's office, while the Headmaster was present, and was neither seen nor detected in any way. Harry thought that Draco was already close to being senior Auror material (based on everything he had read in the School's library about the Aurors) in the areas of stealth/evasion and potions-creation and Hermione agreed. Draco was just naturally hugely talented in those areas. Harry was great at making potions for which there were already recipes, but he didn't yet have any skills in creating new potions from scratch like Draco did, the fluke with the liquid Fiendfyre aside.

The four went on talking for another two hours, before they decided to head towards bed or at least towards their private suites. Daphne and Draco wanted to take advantage of the magical hot-tub and Harry wanted to spend some more time magically merged with Hermione – preferably all night. Before they went their separate ways though, Harry took Draco aside and spoke with him.

"What?" Draco said, not completely understanding why Harry had pulled him aside.

"Hermione told me this afternoon, when we were merged, that it's not just you and Daphne who need the potion, but Ginny and Luna and a bunch of others. I don't know if this is going to work, but she thought that you ought to have some say in what happens with it."

“Why?”

“I don’t know, Draco. Maybe because there are kids who still believe the whole ‘pure-blood’ thing that their parents are banging on about, just like your father did, and that they’re not going to trust me as much as they’ll trust you. I’m just a kid with a scar, who may be a bit touched in the head – at least if you believe all the stuff that the Prophet has written about me these last four weeks.”

Draco looked at him, genuinely thoughtful by what Harry had said about others trusting him. “The Prophet is nothing but bog-roll, Harry. You know that. As for other kids trusting me...fuck that. They don’t even know me. All they see when they look at me is my father’s money and whatever fantasy he’s cooked up for people to believe about the Malfoy family.”

Harry smiled and nodded. “Knew there was a reason I liked you, Draco. You’re right about the Prophet being nothing but bog-roll. It’s like the rag that my ‘uncle’ used to read – the “Guardian”, half-truths at best and outright lies at worst. As for your father...anyone who’d do anything to a little girl deserves the worst. Can you imagine if someone felt the same way about girls like Daphne and kidnapped her for their ‘pleasures’? You’d want to kill the person.” Harry saw the immediate anger in Draco’s eyes and knew that he had hit the right spot. “What you’re feeling right now Draco... that’s how Muggles feel about their little girls, too.” He didn’t want to think about the fact that there were probably ‘pure-bloods’ who would have done unspeakable things to HIS Hermione for the very same, terrible reasons.

The young blond boy put his hand on Harry’s shoulder and said, “You and me, Harry. Friends always?”

Their eyes met and there was an understanding between them. “Yes, Draco. Friends always.” Harry meant it. It didn’t take any kind of genius to see how passionate Draco was about Daphne and the fact that he completely understood the point Harry had been making about the evil things that Lucius Malfoy had done.

“Good, Harry.” Hermione’s voice said softly in his mind. “Now all we have to do is get that potion and we’re in business.”

“Hopefully, that will be easier done than said.”

“Got that right. I just hope that he’s not totally furious if he catches on that it’s been stolen. He’s going to know, one way or the other, in thirty to thirty-five days anyway.”

“We’ll deal with that when we get there. Remember what the poster in your cousin’s room said? The one that read, ‘Better to ask forgiveness than permission’...? Well once Draco, Daphne, and the others take the potion, there’s no going back, so at worst, they’ll give us detention for some extended period of time. It’s not like they can write to my parents or anything...” Harry’s thoughts to Hermione suddenly trailed off, as the immediate sadness of Harry’s sole-survivorship struck home with him.

“I’m... I’m sorry, Harry.” Hermione said, pushing at him her love and the sadness that she also felt for his unspeakable loss. “You’ll see them again Harry, I know it.”

“You think so?” He said tentatively across their link.

“Yes Harry. I do. Some day, WE will be with them again.”

There was nothing for it but to disapparate back to their private suite and fall into his wife’s waiting arms; letting flow the tears that he had held back for so very, very long.

Late morning, Saturday, October 5, 1991 – Staff room, Hogwarts

“It’s been stolen for sure, Headmaster”

The old wizard looked up from his dark red-leather, wing-back chair. “And? Who could have gotten past your wards, Johan? Surely you don’t suspect...?”

“And how could I not, Albus?” the potions-master said as he paced the floor in front of his friend. “Doesn’t young Mrs. Potter have that phenomenal staff? She could have easily overpowered my wards, and that’s without having shared magic with her husband.”

“You have no proof do you, Johan?”

“You know I don’t, Albus. There’s no magical signature; no residual magic to betray their presence. Trust me, I know both of their signatures and neither the cauldron itself or anything else in the room resonated with their magic.”

The Headmaster cupped his pipe in his hand, as if he was anxious to take a toke from it. “And yet you still suspect them and no one else?”

“Oh come off it, Albus. You know as well as I do that no other students had the impetus to steal it, nor experience enough to know what dosages to give. Besides which, young Mrs. Potter is the most brilliant witch of her age for a very good reason. She knows how to research and find answers. More, she knows how to cross-reference things and do comparative analysis. AND... lest you forget, she has that wondrous library, courtesy of my former ‘associate’. If there’s an answer to be had, I assure you Mrs. Potter will find it.”

The Headmaster thought about the situation for a long while before he said anything. “You can’t just accuse them if you have no evidence, Johan, nor can you presume to take it out of your protégé’s mind. I tried to probe them when I first met them and found that I was looking at black holes. It’s as if they’re not even there. Your former master, if he ever returned, would find that he had no hope of getting at the boy with any of those kinds of powers.”

“Black hole indeed” the potions-master thought to himself. “Very apt Albus, though I never would have believed it possible if I hadn’t made the mistake of trying to probe him myself after they bonded.”

“Then you understand that if they want to conceal the fact that they liberated the growth potion from your lab, there is no way that you’ll get around their privacy.”

Johan looked at him. "Theirs, yes. The others... the ones who start growing... about them I'm not so certain."

"Be certain, Johan. In the last several weeks, you've gone a long way towards rebuilding your relationship with your protégé – that much I can see. Now is not the time to do something rash. If they have liberated the potion, and my every instinct tells me that you're right and that they did, then it was done with both good intentions and probably good planning as well. I know that we'll have every parent possible banging down the doors at the end of the year when they discover that their young children are, in fact, not so young anymore, but I can deal with that. If what you've said about Harry and Hermione is true, we have nothing to fear. At least, not from them."

Eventually, Johan Severus Snape acquiesced and agreed with his long-time friend and mentor that in this particular instance, Harry and Hermione Potter had not only gotten away with doing something that should have been impossible, but would get kudos for having it done it as well.

After Johan left the staff room, "Minerva" walked in. "Well?" she asked quietly. "Is it going to work?"

"I think so, love. They did exactly what we thought they'd do, which was to promptly steal the rest of the batch. It was good thinking on your part to suggest to Johan that he make the full batch. Now, unless Harry and Hermione did something really out of character, we are going to see more than four-dozen students suddenly age between three and four years in about thirty-five days. I just pray that they picked the people we hoped they would."

"They won't have played favorites, with the exception of one or two couples. Hermione will have set up some kind of magical lottery so that everyone had an equal chance who wanted one."

"Who then?" Myrddin asked, looking at his life-long love.

"Draco and Daphne for sure, and probably Luna and Ginny."

“You sure you don’t want Sybil’s job?” he asked her with an arched eyebrow and a note of laughter in his voice.

“Prat” she said, smiling at him. Even after more than thousand years together, he still had a wonderful way about him and could tease her to laughter even about the smallest things.

“You love me anyway” he said, circling her waist with his hands and pulling her close.

“You know I do, Myr” she said in English before reverting to her first language, Aramaic Greek. *Ακόμη και μετά από όλη αυτή τη φορά, αγαπώ σας ποτέ ημέρα* (“Even after all this time, I love you ever day”)

“Vos usquequaque meus pectus pectoris, carus. Vel utpote ut primoris dies” (“You have always had my heart, beloved. Even since that first day.”) He said back to her, in the language he knew from his early childhood.

“Υπάρχει κάτι έχετε να κάνουμε τώρα?” (“Is there anything you have to do now?”) she asked, in her best, most alluring voice.

He smiled lasciviously at her, dropped the illusion of being ‘Albus Dumbledore’, scooped her up in his arms and triggered their private portkey. They would not be seen again for the rest of the day.

Saturday, October 19, 1991 – San Sabastian, Spain – in the Basque region, near Calle Santiago de Compostela; around 10 pm.

The bar was clean – as was typical for almost every bar in Spain – but it was definitely not a place where Muggles would congregate. The food...the tapas set the place apart from most other bars. Not only were there the traditional favorites: Serrano jamon (Serrano ham sliced thinly and then wrapped around a grilled asparagus stalk); artisanal Idiazábal cheeses, Gildas (Spanish Chile peppers, anchovies, and olives) stacked up on a toothpick, and Prawn and Bacon Brochettes, Quirinius Quirrell smelled other, more wizard-focused foods: grilled snake fillets with garlic, dragon steaks, and

roasted or grilled European flying bison over creamy mushroom risotto.

Somehow, Quirrell's stomach roiled at the thought of anything with garlic. "Please master, no garlic. It makes me ill"

"Fool. What do I care for your passing discomfort? I must have the garlic to counteract the after-effects of weaning off being fed by Nagini".

The pressure in his mind gave him no choice, so Quirinius order the sautéed prawns in garlic over roasted vegetables and the garlic toast. He hoped that he would not be sick for too long and that he would eventually be able to leave the port city. It was too hot and the turban that his master had forced him to wear was itchy and uncomfortable, especially in the heat of the day.

At the end of the meal, the odd-looking wizard paid the bill and the rose; gathering his cloak about him and disappeared out into the night. However, his presence had not gone unnoticed. A tall, sallow-faced man in the corner of the bar watched as the obviously British wizard made his way out the door and into the night. Thirty seconds later, the tall man also went out into the night. Transforming in the shadows that the moonlight threw around the narrow street, the man became a small black bat and made his way into the air, searching for his prey.

Quirrell and the parasite that he called 'master' made it as far as the second outdoor staircase that led to Room no. 7, down at the far end of the three-story hotel. He never made it that far. The bat that had followed him through the night transformed back into a man in an instant and leapt upon the turban-wearing foreigner.

Knocked to the ground, Quirinius Quirrell's world was suddenly shaken by powerful fangs that bit deep into the flesh at the nape of his neck. He tried to reach for his wand, but was unable to grasp it because his arm was pinned to the ground by his body.

"Help me master! I'm not strong enough!"

“Give me control!”

At that moment, Quirinius Quirrell would have done anything to be saved from being bled out by a determined vampire. Giving his master control was the least of the things he was willing to do. He opened his mind and let his master fully control both his mind and magic. A moment later, Quirinius found himself 756 miles away, looking at a full moon from a hill in Hyde Park, gasping and bleeding down his body and all over one shoulder, but alone and otherwise essentially whole.

“You saved us master” Quirrell said, astonished that they were somehow back in England. No wizard was supposed to be able to apparate more than about 150 miles at a time and his master’s magic had just allowed them to make a jump that was many times further than that, he was sure.

“Get us healed, and be quick about it, before I have to punish you for being caught so off guard”

“Yes, Master. I know someone who can, master.” Quirinius said, trying to avoid too much resentment from being heard/felt by his master.

A moment later, the still-bleeding wizard appeared at a dimly lit street-corner in one of the dingier parts of west London, in front of a brick building that was covered with football posters. Stopping in front of one particular West Ham United advert, the hobbled wizard used his wand left-handed to tap on a sequence of characters on the poster. A moment later, a large door appeared where there was wall previously. Placing the tip in the center of the door, above the symbol of the two deer with interlocking antlers, he said in his native polish, “JA pozostaję w pamięci” (“I am remembered”).

The door swung open and urged on by the incessant, pitiless voice in his mind, the tall, thin man stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

Sunday, October 20, 1991 - at Sunrise, just off the N34e and the Nieuwe Rijksweg motorways, west of Bruges, Belgium

Remus Lupin's home overlooked the ocean and it was on his deck that Johan Severus Snape found himself just after sunrise; coffee in hand. He could hear the roar of the ocean, even though it was almost a half-mile away. It wasn't an unpleasant sound, but he knew it would take getting used to hearing.

He was just starting to be able to make out the distinct shapes of seagulls over the ocean when he heard the movement of the sliding glass door behind him.

"Morning, Bats" Remus said softly.

"Morning, Moony" Johan replied. "You're up early"

Remus chuckled. "Yea, the full moon is on the twenty-third and I was just preparing some of the potion. It's going to take an entire day more to get ready. Thanks to you though, it will be the best batch yet."

"Meh. You know what I did?"

Remus shook his head. "No. What did you change?"

Johan turned and leaned against the railing before looking at his long-time friend. "It wasn't me, first of all. It was Harry. He saw that the dried Acacia fly was clashing with the green Holly leaves, so he replaced the Acacia fly with dried Abraxas beetle and that did the trick. It took out all of the volatility of the potion."

"Harry?" he said, framing the questions in his tone.

"Yes, Harry. I can't believe that I didn't see it before. It was really obvious. I've been kicking myself for the last couple of days over it."

"How did he know?"

“Easy. I made him and Hermione memorize the table of known interactions. It was right there all along, yet I missed it somehow.”

Remus looked at his long-time friend in amazement. “Student teaching the teacher?”

Running a hand through his dark but wavy hair, he said, “Yes. And it’s very, very frustrating. I got my mastery more than twelve years ago and yet here is Harry, mostly, fixing MY mistakes.”

“You sure it’s not beginner’s luck?”

“No, and that’s what bugs me. I didn’t tell you what Harry did the first time, did I?”

“No. What else has my god-pup done?” Remus asked, with a bit of humor in his voice.

“Liquid Fiendfyre” Johan said, in a not-quite-flat tone of voice.

“WHAT? Tell me you’re kidding.”

“Not so you’d know it. He changed around a recipe for Gubraithian Fire the first night I found him. Added some sulfur in place of potassium and et voilà, liquid Fiendfyre.”

“And it really works?”

“Yes. Damn near burned down the forest outside Edinburgh testing it. Just smash the vial against a rock and suddenly....” Johan gestured with both hands to indicate a massive wave all around him “you have an instant conflagration.”

“Incredible. It’s that easy to make?”

“For any third-year and above. That’s what’s so horrifying. It’s one of those things. It’s going to get a lot of witches and wizards killed if the secret of how to make it gets out and we don’t immediately start teaching how to control Fiendfyre.”

"I don't think you came all this way just to tell me about Harry and his obvious success in your class. What's really going on?"

Johan shook his head and then said, "You were always the smartest one of us, Remus."

"No I wasn't. That was..."

"Lily. I know. But she's not in the mix right now...at least for this discussion."

"Then what's going on?"

"Straight out then?"

"Yea, straight out."

Rubbing his eyes for a moment against the residual tiredness that he felt from multiple apparitions that he had had to make the previous day in order to get all the way to Remus' house without having to resort to an international portkey that could be tracked, Johan said, "Harry and Hermione stole all of the left-over growth potion that I had been storing in my private lab. Albus and I have talked and we've both come to the conclusion that the two of them have given it out to others in the bonded dorm that they've made friends with. We're going to see, probably by the end of the first week in November, a bunch of students who've just added four or five years' physical growth."

"Mama Mia. How in God's green hell did they get past your wards?"

Johan snorted. "Remember Hermione's birthday? She was given a four-foot long magical staff by one of the Indian children. I know because I asked. Harry and Hermione trust me...perhaps more than they ought at this age...and Hermione told me all about it. It bonded with her as soon as she touched it, meaning that she's the only one who can wield it. If my guess is right, it triples or maybe even quadruples her power for some things – like breaking into places where she doesn't belong. My wards, as good as they are, wouldn't have stood a chance against that."

“And you believe that she and Harry took the leftovers simply because the cauldron was emptied and the two of them had the power to do it?”

“Essentially...yes. There were no magical signatures and the wards were restored to exactly the way I had set them on the way back out of my lab...so it had to be someone who’s really meticulous and knows how I do things. Sound like anyone you know?” Johan asked, mostly rhetorically.

The former Auror and current magical forensic pathologist for the magical EU looked at his friend. “Ok. So I’m convinced. What is it exactly that you want me to do about it?”

Johan shook his head. “I’m not sure, really. I think that we’ve got to be watching Harry and Hermione pretty closely – well, as closely as we can – over the next several months. The two of them together are...formidable. With another six or seven years of experience, they’d be a match for any one or more of us and I’d like very much to keep them on our side, instead of working against us.”

“Why do you think they’d work against us?” Remus asked, wandlessly summoning the pot of coffee from the kitchen inside.

“Well, that’s the thing. You know how the pure-bloods are. They’re going to try to stifle Hermione, no matter how high in the wizarding world Harry rises. More, they’re always going to be resentful because she’s consistently beating all of their children in terms of grades. Granted, it’s a small gap in the case of a few of the students, but Hermione is still top of the school to this point in terms of grades.”

Remus nodded. He’d been quietly worried about more or less the same issues as his friend. It was good, he thought, to get some of the things out into the open. “At least she doesn’t flaunt it at all. You’d hardly know she was in one of your classes, except when you asked her for the answer and she gives you back not just the textbook answer, but the answer from several OTHER textbooks as well and then goes on to tell you the differences between the answers. Damn disconcerting that is.”

Johan threw his head back and roared with laughter at his friends' answer.

It took more than a minute for Johan to get some control back and when he did, he put his hand out and touched his friends' arm. "Not worried that she's going to replace you, are you?" he said, still chuckling.

Remus blew a very restrained raspberry at his friend and then said, "You know Ms. Tonks – Andy's daughter? Well, she's taken to impersonating dear Ms. Granger once in a while when she gives an answer in class. The first time that I saw her do it, I damn near peed myself I was laughing so hard."

Johan nodded, also laughing at the image. "Have you seen her do Minerva? She was doing it in the hallway one afternoon up on the seventh floor, near the picture of Barnabas the Barmy and didn't see Minerva walking up behind her. She turned, still wearing Minerva's face...oh my god. I've never seen a girl turn so many shades of red at one time. It was an hour before any of the kids around her could stop laughing. Minerva was so traumatized by it that she couldn't say anything and fled back to her office."

Johan hadn't heard that particular story and had to clutch his stomach he was laughing so hard. Minerva had been his friend ever since he had started as a student at the school – perhaps his very first real friend – and she meant the world to him. Hearing that the young Metamorphmagus had learned to imitate his friend so skillfully was funny beyond description.

Once Remus had poured them both another cup of coffee – his second and Johan's third of the morning – the two sat down in the chairs that faced out towards the ocean.

"Ok. Back to the matter at hand. How do we keep Harry from trying to totally tear apart wizarding society in England while he tries to defend Hermione's interests?"

Remus looked pensive for a moment and then said, "I'm not sure we do. Think about it. If Harry and Hermione have done what you think they've done and given the growth potion to a bunch of the bonded students, they'll have earned themselves a huge amount of loyalty and might very well be on their way towards building a private army of sorts. With the kind of money that Harry has access to, combined with what Draco Greengrass and Neville Longbottom have, the two of them are essentially in a position to change the wizarding culture operates – simply by using their money for or against certain causes or ideals. It may end up that we have to decide whether we want to ride on their train as opposed to use trying to get Harry and Hermione to subscribe to our way of looking at things."

What his friend was saying made sense, but was scary after a fashion. "What happens if Harry feels like Hermione's never going to get a fair shake here in England? What if he decides to take his money and bail?"

Remus knew he wasn't a sociologist by any stretch of the imagination, but he knew something about history and how large numbers of people moved around. European history was something by which he was fascinated and of which he knew a great deal. "Then we could end up seeing the end of wizarding culture in the Kingdom. Harry has access to a very great deal of money. If he convinces Neville and Draco to follow his lead and leave the country...well, let's just say that the river of money going OUT of England could become a raging torrent. That would destroy the pure-bloods just as surely as anything you could imagine. Just think what would happen if all those of mixed parentage decided to leave. Out of 120,000 or so magical families, there might be 20 to 30 thousand magic users left. That's more than enough of a loss to destroy wizarding culture in the country."

Johan looked at him. "So if my former master does return, he could be destroyed simply by leaving him no one to govern?"

"Not that easy, I'm afraid. Remember that your former master was a complete and total psychopath. He loved killing for its own sake. He'd be unhinged by the fact that there was no one left really to govern, but he'd adjust. He'd try taking on the Muggles....and they'd eventually find a way to kill him. It would be a blood-bath, but they'd

find a way. No, I think that Harry's going to have to see to it that if he does come back, that he's able to put a stop to him before any damage can really occur. It's our job – yours and mine – to teach him everything we know and do it as quickly as we can. We don't know how many years we have, but I'd bet everything I have that it's not enough. Better that we get started sooner than later, I think."

It was too much to take in really, so Johan looked at his friend and said, "What are we going to do about Sirius?"

"Well – the only people who know for sure that he's innocent are you, me, Sirius, Peter and the Headmaster. The only way that we can get at the truth is either confront the Headmaster and force him to use his powers to get Sirius released by blackmailing him or we try to stun him – all of us together at once - and make him testify under Veritaserum that James and Lily switched secret-keepers at the last moment and used Peter instead of Sirius. Alternatively, we find and catch Peter and turn him over to the DMLE."

"What makes you think Peter is still alive?" Johan asked, shocked. He remembered telling Lily's portrait that he thought Peter was still alive, but there were times when he doubted it, at least a bit. He was sure that living as a rat was not easy, animagus or not.

"Because I smelled him my first day back. He's in the Castle, somewhere."

"WHAT?!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Johan yelled at his friend. "And you didn't bother to tell me this until now?"

"Calm down, Bats. It's alright. I've been thinking about this problem. I didn't believe that Peter could still be alive either, but recently, the smell has been stronger and it's unmistakable. I used to be able to track Peter purely by smell. I was the only one of the five of us who could – and it's not one that I'd easily forget. I was going to come to you when I was really sure, but seeing that you've come to me..."

Johan silently considered the revelation that Peter Pettigrew was still alive and what that meant for them all. Leaning back into his chair and adjusting himself a little bit so he was more comfortable, the

potions-master said, "I never told you what happened the night that I took Harry to his vault at Gringotts, did I?"

"No. I know that Harry doesn't want to talk about it though. I asked him during class if he had found anything interesting in his vault when he mentioned having gone to see it; thinking that a young boy getting access to his ancestral vault so early would give him a chance to find all sorts of interesting things. The Potters are the third-oldest wizarding family in Europe after all."

"James and Lily's portraits were there, Moony" Johan said sadly.

That caused the older man to sputter for a moment. "Did you talk....?"

"It was still her, Moony. As beautiful as the day we met her." Snape replied wistfully.

Wiping a surprising tear away from the corner of his eye, the red-ish haired man said, "I still miss her. She was the best."

"Why Remus, I do believe you might have felt something for our dearest Lily..." Johan said, a bit of teasing in his voice.

Lupin looked at him and wished, not for the first time, that he could turn on a bit of his 'inner wolf', so that he could get back at his friend for his jest. He couldn't though, so he settled for whacking his friend on the shoulder with the back of his hand. "Prat. You know I loved her. Not as much as you did, but when I needed her...she was there. After all, it was she who first suggested that you and the others become animagi in order to be with me."

Neither man needed to mention the awfulness that was Snape's growing-up experience, nor did either want to talk about the years after that, when Snape became a death-eater and then, at great risk to his own life, a spy for the Headmaster's private army – the Order of the Phoenix – after Lily was killed by Voldemort. "I know. She was like no one I had ever known before."

"Did you ever think that you and she would fall so hard for each other?" Lupin asked very softly.

“No...though I think I hoped that I’d find someone like her. I remember lying on my bed at home, thinking about the fact that everyone around me seemed to be ‘coupling up’ and I had no one. Then Lily....told me on the train at the beginning of our fourth year....that she felt the same way and that she liked me.”

“You never told me that.”

“Well, you were off playing exploding snap with James, Sirius, and Peter. I wasn’t going to just blurt it out and besides, Lily and I weren’t sure exactly how we wanted to handle things at first.”

Lupin turned in his seat a little bit and then said, “You were the lucky one. You got almost three years with her...”

“Not as lucky as James.”

Nodding, Lupin said “So...you were going to tell me what happened in the vault....?”

Johan took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. “Well... you know that after I dealt with Harry’s relatives, I took him to the Leaky Cauldron and took a room for the night, so that I could have Harry safe, as well as properly fed. The first thing I did was to bring him prime rib, gravy, potatoes, fresh bread, and some cranberry sauce so that he could experience real food. He was probably two or two and a half-stone underweight and I knew I had to do something about that fast. You know? One of the first things that Harry said was that he was actually really concerned for me because of what I did to his relatives.”

“Sounds like Harry, though if what you’ve told me about how he grew up is anything like the real truth of it it’s a miracle that he thinks about anyone else. Most all of us would have long since been broken by that kind of upbringing.”

“I know. His bonding to Hermione I think has a great deal to with that, but I can’t prove it. You know that neither I nor Albus can read their thoughts? Harry and Hermione, as well as Draco and Daphne, are

nothing but black holes when we try to read them. Can't pick up their emotions or anything. That wasn't true at all the night that I rescued Harry, but it's sure as hell true now. Oh, and if you're wondering, I can't read you at all, either. Something about your 'furry little problem' keeps me from feeling or seeing anything, so no worries there."

Lupin arched one eyebrow, much like the Headmaster often did. Albus and Johan were the only two Legilimens that he knew and he had always been curious about whether, around them, his thoughts were truly his own. It was good to know that they were. "You still haven't told me about what happened in the vault and I'm dying to hear that story."

"Yea. Sorry. I got distracted. So I took Harry from the Leaky Cauldron the next morning to Gringotts and... oh fuck it. Let me just give you the memory instead. It's faster that way."

Taking out his wand, Johan pushed the memory to the front of his mind and then let his magic 'excrete' a copy of it out of his head, in the form of a wispy silver thread. Johan handed the wand to his friend and watched as he touched the tip, with the memory wrapped around it, to his forehead. It was immediately absorbed through the man's skin.

Lupin's eyes closed as the memory of the night, the next day, and the encounter with Lily and James' portraits flooded his thoughts.

Minutes later, a very shaken Remus Lupin opened his eyes and looked at his friend. "I'm glad you killed the Muggles."

Johan didn't answer the statement. The memories gave the man all he needed. "You can see her, if you want. I know Harry wouldn't mind."

"Really? You sure?"

"Yea, I'm sure."

"Good. When we get back. Now, what do we do about Sirius?"

The conversation went on for almost another hour before Johan did a very casual tempus spell and found out that it was almost 10 A.M. and it was getting past time for him to be leaving. Standing up, the potions-master looked at his friend and said, "I've got to get going. If I don't get to Bruges before 11 A.M., all of the stores will be sold-out of the things I need and I'll end up begging potions-supplies from Beauxbatons."

Lupin looked up at him before standing himself and said, "Well, you better get going then! We can't have you looking bad in front of the rest of the staff, now can we?"

"Keep it up Moony and I'll go to borrow that neat little charm from Mrs. Potter for the next full moon".

"You wouldn't!"

Johan smirked and then said, "Wanna bet? I thought you looked great in pink. It did great things for your femininity."

"Go! Before I show you just why I was made the DADA professor!"

"Promises, promises Remus! Tata!" Johan did his best imitation of stuck-up bit of skirt on Oxford Street and then disappeared.

Remus shook his head and then sat back down, waiving a hand in the general direction of the coffee thermos so that it floated over to him. Taking it in hand, he poured himself another cup and thought about all that he and Johan had discussed. Their conversations were always fun, but this morning it was particularly revealing. Not only had he gotten a chance to see his friends' memory of Harry's encounter with his parents' portraits, but he had learned a great deal more about the situation with his other friend and partner-in-crime, Sirius Black.

As he thought about everything, he realized that if Harry and Hermione were trying to build their own 'army', he was more than likely going to have some role to play in its development and he wondered if, after they sprang Sirius from Azkaban – by whatever means necessary – it would be possible to get some time with Harry

and Hermione during their upcoming summers, so that they would not forget all that they had worked on during the school year.

On the southeastern edge of the Forbidden forest – at twilight –
October 30, 1991

“I’m ca.....cold...ma...ma....Master. Please let me build a small fire!”
Quirinius said silently to his ever-present master.

“No, you fool. If you build a fire, the game-keeper will see the smoke and come and investigate. We can’t risk being discovered.”

“But I’m going to freeze, master! I won’t be able to control the Troll if I get sick!”

“Silence! You are even more pitiful than I could have imagined. Even Wormtail didn’t whine like a little girl. Bah! If you must, heat that large rock behind you and keep us warm that way.”

“Thank you, Master. I won’t fail you, Master!”

Quirinius did as he was bidden and used heating charms to bring the roughly 2x2 ft. rock up to a temperature sufficient to keep them warm all night. It was not the warm, crackling fire that he had hoped for, but he had to obey his Master, even if that meant sacrificing himself.

As night settled in, he leaned back against one of the larger, flat-faced boulders that surrounded their campsite. Looking over at the enormous forest roll that he/they had found and gotten under control, the foolish former DADA instructor wondered what good it would do his master when they released into the school. His Master wasn’t answering any of his questions and he dared not press the matter further, because his Master’s punishments were harsh and without remorse. Soon morning would come and he would start getting answers to all his questions – whether he liked them or not.

2:30 Pm. – Defense against the Dark Arts – Hogwarts School, West tower, 7th floor.

After filing in, the third-year students took their seats and more or less readied themselves for class. Harry and Hermione, who had already finished all of the required work through the end of November, took out their spiral notebooks and pens, as well as their wands. Their Muggle things drew some disapproving sideways glances from the 'purebloods', but neither Harry nor Hermione let it bother them. All of the Muggle-born students used the same things and it gave them a distinct advantage when it came to note-taking and organization.

Hermione's staff was hidden in her bag and ready for use if push ever came to shove, but she didn't anticipate ever needing it in class – especially with a competent instructor present. "Please turn to page 81 and take a moment to read just the first two paragraphs of your text. When you've done that, look up me and we'll begin the class."

When everyone had done so, Professor Remus Lupin began his lecture. It went on for about twenty minutes and covered the three kinds of trolls that lived in the Forbidden forest. To everyone's surprise, it was Fred Weasley who asked the first question. "Sir, if the principal differences between the three troll-types are basically what and how they eat, where they live, and what weapons they favor, why doesn't the book just say that there's one type of troll and that what you call it depends on where you find it?"

Remus smiled and then put the piece of chalk that was in his hand down on the large, mahogany desk in front of him. "Good question, Fred. You're basically right...but if this were the OWL's, you'd be wrong. The three types of trolls are called separate species not just because of the things you've mentioned, but also because of fundamental differences in their physiognomy – which means the structure or characteristics of their faces – but also because of differences in their magical essences. A mountain troll will not breed with a forest troll, nor will a forest troll ever breed with either a rock troll or a river troll. There are no river-trolls here, though there certainly could be, given the fact that we live on the edge of a fjord which is fed by rivers to the west and north of us. For example: The

rock trolls that live near here rely exclusively on the lichen that lives on the granite outcroppings in the mountains that surround us. They use it as both food and when necessary, for bedding down the baby rock-trolls. The forest trolls, however, are omnivorous and will generally eat anything that crosses their path. They prefer their food to be dead already, but they're not averse to killing their own food when they have to. Most all of the forest trolls carry an enormous club, one which they fashion themselves with their own unique brand of magic, and they use it to bash anything that looks like a threat. The rock trolls can and will pick up rocks in excess of three hundred pounds and hurl them at enemies. They've been observed literally calling rocks out of the ground to use as weapons. Trust me when I tell you, you don't want to face them.

Lupin paused a moment and then turned so that he could write some things on the board behind him with the piece of chalk that suddenly appeared in his hand. "There are also differences in the enemies that trolls have. For instance, the only creature of which a forest troll is afraid, at least according to the records gathered by the Ministry's agents, is a full-grown acromantula."

"What about dragons?" George asked.

"Don't know. There haven't been any dragons in the Forbidden forest for about three hundred years. There are some Welsh greens living in the mountains to the north of us, but it's a small breeding colony and unlikely to ever get down this way. In answer to your direct question – we don't know whether forest trolls are afraid of dragons or not."

The Weasley twins looked satisfied and the class pushed on. Eventually, the topic swung around to what to do about a troll if one should ever be unlucky enough to encounter such. Reaching down into a hidden pocket inside his cloak, Remus took out his wand, held it up, and asked, "Is this the best defense against a troll?"

Most of the students nodded. He noticed appreciatively that neither Harry nor Hermione did.

Slamming the wand down on the desk hard, he said "WRONG." There was a stunned silence as the thirty students tried to process

why that might be the case. When he could see that there was not a forthcoming question, he pushed on. “Anyone want to guess again?”

Harry finally raised his hand, though tentatively.

“Yes, Harry?”

“Apparate or run away, sir?”

“CORRECT. Five points to Ravenclaw. Want to try for ten by telling me why?”

“Yes, sir. I think that the reason that you’d want to run away or apparate away is that generally, a troll is so magically resistant that unless you are able to strike with full power at one of its weak spots – like the eyes or throat – you don’t have much chance of bringing it down. Full-grown wizards would be challenged, one on one, sir.”

“Another five points to Ravenclaw, Harry. Very, very good.” There was a good bit of muttering in the class until Lupin spoke again. “For those of you who are wondering if I’m up here advocating cowardice versus bravery, you perhaps ought to think about the fact that there is no honor in dying needlessly. More than likely, a troll will kill you if it gets you boxed in somewhere. Your only chance is to apparate away or run from it. I have been fighting against the dark arts and dealing with dangerous creatures since I received my masteries and I can tell you that I would not, under any circumstances, ever take on a troll by myself unless I absolutely had no other choice. They are dumb, dangerous, and have absolutely no mercy in them. If you look like a threat or like dinner, they will attack you.” Just then, the magical alarm signaling that it was 10 minutes until the start of the next class sounded throughout the hallways. “Alright, class. For next time, I want two rolls of parchment on the characteristics of the three species of trolls in your book or for the Muggle-born, ten full pages, double-spaced. Have a good day.”

With that, Remus Lupin dismissed the class. He was smiling to himself because Harry, Hermione, and the twins had already finished the assignment and knew everything that he was talking about in the class. Harry, in particular, had taken the assignment to heart and

done it up right, by referencing four other works that were housed in the school's library. Hermione, for her part, had even charmed a scroll to display anatomical pictures of a dead troll to point out all of the potions ingredients that could be obtained from a troll's body.

As the horde of teenagers filled the hallways, voices were raised in excitement, as all the students recognized that there was only one more class before everyone was let out for the day.

The Halloween Feast was something that everyone looked forward to and there was a general, unspoken agreement that the weekend was about to begin. Friday classes went until noon and then let out; giving everyone time to decompress before starting weekend plans. Even the teachers could feel it. Johan Severus Snape was among them and was feeling a bit of resentment for the fact that he was going to have to chaperone the Halloween Feast. The plans that he had made for the weekend would have been just that much better if he and his beloved wife had been able to get away already.

Once the third- and remedial fourth-year students had all piled into his class and had come to order, he strode in, slamming the door behind him. It was an act calculated to inspire fear and loathing, but he was getting tired of it. Playing the bad-guy when your heart's not in it was hard.

"Lord Potter" he sneered his best sneer as he made it to the front of the room, "What is today's assignment or haven't you bothered to read that far?"

Harry looked at him and their eyes met. It was just long enough for master and apprentice to share information silently, without the rest of the class being the wiser for it. "Yes I have, sir." Harry said in the same tone of voice. Hermione was seething with anger that such a charade should have to occur, but realized that it was intended to placate and otherwise confuse the upper-year Slytherin students; most of whom were the children of death-eaters who had either been killed after the last uprising or who had escaped prosecution by buying their way free.

Johan let the disrespectful voice slide as an issue. The charade had to be carefully done and had to be believable, without going wrong like it did the last time. "Perhaps then you can tell us all then what is today's assignment?"

"Eckhart's Vanishing Solution, sir."

Their eyes met again and Harry felt his master's gentle, mental probe. He let it in immediately.

"Very good, Harry. Well done. I thought we were going wrong there for a moment."

"You had me fooled there for a moment. I thought you were still angry about the other day."

"Over and forgotten Harry – at least for what happened here in class."

"Thank you, Master."

"You're welcome, my son." he said in Harry's mind, very softly, before withdrawing.

Hermione's voice slipped softly into his mind. "Good, love. I'm proud of you. I hate that you have to play such awful games just for their sake's" (by that Harry knew that she was referring to the Slytherin-students)

Unnoticed by the other students in the class, Harry covered Hermione's hands with his and pushed at her all the love and affection that he felt towards her, across their bond. A corona of intense red and then blinding white light formed around Hermione before it dissipated a moment later. Somehow, the magic satisfied her and reassured her right down to her very core. "Thank you"

"You're welcome, love. I just.....needed to show you how much I love you."

"And you do, every single day. Now, we better get started on the potion."

Fifty minutes later, Hermione carefully approached the Potions-Master's desk and handed him two very carefully and neatly labeled 75 ml. beakers of their Vanishing Solution, his and hers. What Johan didn't see, as there were lots of students cued up to do the same thing, was Harry taking the rest of their batch and pouring it into four separate 100 ml. beakers, before stoppering them with unbreakable seals.

Hermione knew he was doing it, but deliberately looked away so that she didn't draw unneeded attention to him. She wanted the potion just as much as he did. It had all sorts of uses – not the least of which were in setting traps of various kinds. She hoped that Draco had been exaggerating when he had told them about the remaining death eaters and what they might try to do to her, to Harry, and to anyone else they saw as a threat, but she feared that he was much more right than wrong and the day would come when things like Vanishing Potion would be very useful indeed.

Once they were out of the potions lab, they made their way quickly and quietly to the point where they had stashed their brooms. From there, it was a quick trip to the top of the southern-most tower, where the bonded students resided.

The entire tower was magically protected from intrusion by any other student, so that the bonded students would really have the privacy that their newly-formed relationships demanded. It was a much more secure than even the older, non-bonded girls' dorms generally were, which made everyone feel better.

"Do you think your master picked up on us freebooting the potion?" Hermione asked as they walked, hand-in-hand down to their private suite.

"Probably. He doesn't miss much. My bet is that he probably figures that if we can hijack the growth potion from inside his secure lab, then keeping us from 'borrowing' things like a Vanishing Potion is kind of pointless."

They were about to launch into another conversation when Draco Greengrass née Malfoy knocked on the main door to their suite and then opened the door. He was three steps into their suite when Hermione looked up and almost fell over in shock. The scrawny, four-foot something boy was gone and in his place a five-foot seven, radiantly handsome, blue-eyed, platinum-haired young man wearing an enormous smile.

“Hermione!”

“Draco?”

He was beaming. “Yup!”

“It worked?”

Draco did a very dramatic pirouette, showing off his now healthy, strong physique. “Oh my god! You look great!”

Draco stopped and began laughing. After a moment, he caught himself and straightened up. “You should see Daphne!”

Hermione stood and walked over to where Draco stood. She ran an appreciative hand over his shoulders. “Looking good! She must be thrilled.”

Draco took her hand and brought it to his lips; kissing it gently. “It’s all thanks to you and Harry, love.”

“Flirt” she said, blushing at his gentleness and the affection that he had showed her. “Now tell me, what happened?”

Pulling Draco by the upper arm, she led him over to one of the plush seats and bade him sit. Just then, Harry walked in and saw the two sitting. Harry was not quite as undone by Draco’s new appearance. “Looks good, Draco! How do you feel?”

“Like a million, Harry. Is this how you felt?”

Harry nodded. "When I woke up after the change, I could feel my magic all over again. It was like I had just stuck my finger into some pure magical source. Then I saw Hermione....." He smiled a sinfully sexy smile at his wife. Draco saw the look and realized just exactly what Harry was thinking – which mirrored his own feelings when he saw the 'new' Daphne wake up hours earlier.

"It's amazing. I wanted to stop by and thank you both. The things that I couldn't do yesterday in class I can do today without thinking about them. I can even do the wandless magic that you've been trying to teach me."

Harry managed a blush that was distinctly asexual. "You're welcome, Draco. We were glad to help. You and Daphne deserved it more than anyone else, maybe even more than us, for all that you were facing." That earned Harry a glare from Hermione and a look of disbelief from Draco.

"Not hardly. I don't have a dork lord after me and mine like some I know..."

It wasn't something Harry could dispute, at least not credibly, so he let it go. "Well, whatever. I'm just glad that the potion worked for you and Daphne. It's nice to know that we could help."

"And don't forget to tell Daphne that she's even prettier now. If I know anything, it's that boys are dense and you'd have forgotten, if I didn't remind you" Hermione added, thinking that she was only benefitting Draco's relationship.

Instead, Draco turned a little white and then red, as he contemplated what Hermione had said. Finally he said, "Ya, right. Do I look stupid or something?" His tone of voice left no doubt that he was offended and not a little pissed off at what Hermione had implied.

"Go, Hermione. You've ticked him off and I'm going to have to cool him down" Harry said coolly over his bond with Hermione.

"C'mon Draco. I'll walk back with you to your suite. If Daphne's gotten more beautiful than she was, I want to see her." He tried to keep it

light-hearted, so that Draco was distracted from his clearly angry reaction to Hermione's ill-chosen words. It worked for the most part and Draco turned without saying anything further to Hermione.

When they were almost to Draco and Daphne's private suite, Draco turned and said, "You know Harry, for someone who's as fucking smart as Hermione, she sure as hell knows how to put her foot in it sometimes."

Since Harry had been thinking the same thing, he nodded. "Yea. I love her more than life itself, but tact is not something her parents taught her a lot of when she was younger. She says what she's thinking without always considering what the impact will be on others. A bit like Luna in the honesty department."

Draco laughed at that. Luna was known for her hugely good heart as well as her incredible love for Ginny, but also for her bluntness. She seemed to say the things that were on her mind or that she observed, without always considering the fact that truth is sometimes a painful thing to be handed around.

Pushing open the suite door, Draco led Harry inside and told him to sit, while he asked Dobby to get them some cold Butterbeers. The mischievous little elf returned quickly from wherever he kept such things and gave one to each of them. They clinked bottles together, like they had seen the teachers do and then Draco silently called Daphne to them. When she appeared, Harry's jaw almost hit the ground, rescued only by his inner-discipline and resolve not to make a fool of himself. Daphne smiled and then walked over to Harry, who stood up and took a step forward, so that he could give her a kiss on the cheek. "You look incredibly beautiful, Daphne. How do you feel?"

"Awesome Harry. Just incredibly awesome. I can feel my magic pulsing all over my body and I can feel my connection to Draco so much better than before. It's like someone turned on a hundred lights or something."

"That, and the fact that you have a fucking hot body, love" Draco added, as he moved closer to her.

Daphne giggled. “Such a boy” she said, before turning and giving her husband an absolutely toe-curling kiss.

“On that note, I’ll just let myself out. Will I see you both tonight for the feast?”

Giving Harry the hand-sign for yes, Draco went back to kissing his beloved and Harry quietly slipped out the door, closing it securely behind him.

October 31, 1991 - 7 pm. – The Great Hall – Hogwarts

By the time the Halloween Feast began, Harry and Hermione had worked out their issues regarding what Hermione had said to Draco regarding Daphne. It had taken the better part of an hour to talk through Hermione’s embarrassment and Harry’s frustration – borne of his feelings of protectiveness towards his friendship with Draco – to get to the point where both were feeling happy towards the other again. It was their first real disagreement and neither enjoyed the feeling of sadness that came along with the hurt that the incident had caused. In the end, both wanted to put the matter behind them and get back to loving the other.

Everyone was dressed up, though not as much as they would be when the first formal ball was held at New Years’. Harry and his ‘boys’ - meaning Neville, Draco, and a bunch of the other bonded, had all ventured out weeks earlier to Diagon Alley to be fitted with dressier robes. They had hated being parted from their wives – but there was not an alternative plan readily available to them – so they made the expedition as efficient as possible. It was completed, on a Saturday, in less than two hours...which Professor McGonagall declared, under her breath and in a way that couldn’t be overheard by the students she thought, was some kind of shopping record. Hermione and the bonded girls did the smart thing, they thought, by arranging for all the available dress-designers to come to Hogwarts, so that they could take their time and get the ‘perfect’ outfit. Not a single girl went away from the experience unhappy or in an outfit that didn’t suit her to a ‘T’. Of course, it didn’t go unnoticed by the female

professors watching the festivities that at the end of the massive dress-buying bonanza, Hermione Potter had pulled the dress-designers aside very quietly and paid for every single dress that had been purchased. Hermione had suggested it to Harry when the idea was first discussed and he had happily given her, as she knew he would, carte blanche to spend whatever she thought appropriate. Though that kind of generosity was generally unheard of – even in pureblood circles, it was agreed among those same professors that if Hermione chose not to say anything about it to anyone, then they wouldn't either.

At the opening of the Feast, Professors Hagrid and Sprout stood and did some magic that left everyone almost speechless. Hermione gripped Harry's hand tightly as the two worked in perfect concert to transform the Great Hall into an enormous indoor pumpkin patch. The normal school tables transformed to become huge, flat, round tables – each accommodating eight students and the Hall itself became overgrown with lush pumpkin vines that magically clung to the walls and rafters and from which hung beautiful orange, glowing flowers. Cascading moonbeams lit each table in soft, radiant light. Hermione noticed that there no elves to be seen anywhere and she thought it odd. However, she was amazed and delighted when platters of food started floating towards each table – each with a green pixie under it.

There was no detail too small, Harry noticed. The Great Hall's normal oak floor was gone; replaced by what looked to be soft, warm, leaf-covered earth. Even the dance floor was earthen, rather than wood.

Once the luscious (and fattening) food had been consumed, Hagrid stood up again and created a musician's platform that was so natural-looking that most everyone would have sworn it had grown out of a single tree-root. Hermione noticed that he was dressed in what looked to be a cross between a pirate's sea-going outfit and something that might have been in vogue in England around the fifteen-century. It wasn't ugly she thought, but it wasn't as dashing as any of Errol Flynn's outfits either.

Harry smiled as he felt/saw her thoughts and had to concur with her assessment of the situation. "Should have gone with one clothing genre and stuck with it. I think I've seen something like what he's

wearing in a few of the Monty Python episodes and that's just not good."

Hermione tried to suppress a laugh but found that it was hard to do. Both of her parents had been raised on a steady diet of Monty Python, so she had been exposed (and corrupted, she thought) at an early age. "Can you see Hagrid as King Arthur? Or better yet, the black knight?"

Harry's comments quickly had Hermione falling off her seat with laughter as she pictured Hagrid saying, "It's just a flesh wound!"

When she regained control, she whacked Harry on the shoulder and told him to behave himself and that he shouldn't make her laugh like that when she's wearing a dress that she could easily 'fall out of'. Clueless as to what she was saying, Hermione had to resort to sending him a very lurid and therefore completely sexy (to Harry's way of thinking) image of what might happen if she had a 'clothing malfunction'.

The band was just setting up when the doors to the Great Hall opened and a man with a turban staggered/fell into the hall. "Troll! There's a troll in the Hall!"

With that, a limited hell broke loose as students scrambled away from the tables closest to the massive doors. The Headmaster stood and used a sonorous charm to get everyone's attention. Everyone save Harry and Hermione.

The moment that the oddly-dressed man fell into the Hall, Harry experienced a flood of hatred and anger such as he had never felt before. It was a desire to kill so strong that he couldn't resist it. The moment he stood up, the power that he always kept under control began to radiate out in all directions. Hermione stood, for she felt what Harry felt, and the two rushed towards the professor. Their wands were out and before any of the school's professors could stop them, and they fired massively powerful stunners at the intruder; all of which hit their mark.

Dumbledore finally saw them and what was going on over the heads of the students who were gathering in the front of the Hall, but he and the other were too far away to effectively intervene. Time seemed to slow down as Harry fell upon the man and, turning him on his back, grabbed the man's face with both hands. Asked later why he had done so, Harry told anyone who wanted to know that it was simply what he was driven to do and that it had felt like the right thing to do. Hermione's stunner to the back of the man's head, execution-style, made sure that Harry's nemesis would never rise again.

Students in the Hall got out of the way as Professors Dumbledore, Hagrid, McGonagall, and Snape launched themselves down the middle aisle in their attempt to not only intervene in what appeared to be an unprovoked attack by Harry and Hermione on a professor, but to protect all of the students against a troll – which everyone knew could be quite dangerous.

"You get Harry an' 'Mione, Headmaster, an' I'll deal with the Troll" Hagrid said, as he neared the two students.

"Godspeed, Hagrid. Be careful"

The massive half-giant moved out of the Great Hall with a haste that no one would have expected of him as he went in search of the troll while the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress tried to intervene on the fallen professor's behalf. Unfortunately for the professor, it was far too late for anything to help him. Even as the Headmaster took a knee, he saw that the professor had begun to turn to dust. It was as odd and unexpected as anything that he could have imagined...and yet, the confrontation was not over.

As he watched his former colleague's body turn to dust, he saw something both strange and terrifying happen. The scar on his famous pupil's forehead began to leak a black, almost viscous ooze that ran down the young man's face, across his body and into the dying professor's body until the scar was entirely gone. For several long seconds, nothing happened, and then a black, horrifying shape rose up and out of the body. It had a strange, ghostly, almost reptilian face to it and it flew out of the Hall on its own – as if it was trying to

escape from the magic which surrounded the school or it was fleeing the young man's presence. The Headmaster couldn't be sure.

Time started to speed up again for all of them and very quickly, Harry found himself pulled to his feet, none too gently by the Headmaster, and interrogated about what had just happened. It didn't take long for Harry to grow frustrated with the repetitious questions, so he put his own wand to his head and drew out the memory of the whole incident and offered it to the Headmaster. Dumbledore took it and put it into a small, crystal vial. "Good then, Harry. I will review this tonight, after the party. For right now, you and your lady are released into Minerva's care."

Stunned that the confrontation was suddenly over, Harry simply nodded and turned to Hermione, who was looking thoughtful, but otherwise not unhappy.

A loud shout of triumph, which rang through the building, indicated to all present that Professor Rubeus Hagrid had been successful in his troll hunt. The Headmaster smiled broadly, as did Johan Severus Snape. He knew that even though the troll belonged to his colleague, it was likely that he'd have a chance to buy it from him for all of the rare and expensive potions-ingredients that it would yield at something close to wholesale price...which made the coming hours of work taking it apart and reducing it to its components all worthwhile. Snape sat back down and made a note to himself to go and arrange to buy the wyvern egg that his friend had been seeking for so long. It was, he thought, the least he could do.

For Harry and Hermione's part, the evening ended as it had begun; with laughter and the company of friends. Minerva McGonagall had made it quite plain to them both that she believed that they must have had good and sufficient reason to do what they did and that in any case, the fact that Harry's scar was suddenly gone was indication enough that something very, very important had just happened.

Eventually, the two of them retired to their private suite and celebrated the loss of one of Harry's least favorite things in the world.

At the stroke of midnight, Harry and Hermione made their way to the highly guarded office/study that Hogwarts itself had created for them and there they talked with Lily and James Potter all about what had happened and about the best Halloween Harry had had since his parents had been taken from him.

As usual, I would ask you to please leave a review. Reader-reviews are the life-blood of this kind of writing and I need/want them no less than the next person. Plus, it gives me a sense of what's working and what isn't. Thank you.

Regards,

the_scribbler

Chapter 9A – “Revelations”

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Headmaster's Office – Hogwarts – Monday, November 18th, 1991 – just after breakfast

Bloodshot eyes were the least of the Headmaster's problems, Snape thought as he looked at the two Aurors who were standing, facing the Headmaster's desk. The pressing problem was the fact that there was another very dead seventh-year Slytherin student and a family howling for the Headmaster's head.

“I don't care, Headmaster, what you think, the fact is that another student has died under your watch and this time, it was not just a one-on-one, but a group-killing. You either explain what in the hell is going on here or I'm going to start issuing arrest warrants and dragging students out of here for questioning.”

Johan looked at Amelia Bones and shook his head. He knew that she really didn't want to do that, but didn't feel like she had any other choice. It was the nature of the political climate that the pure-blood families would be livid that one of their own lay dead – even though he had been the one to provoke the attack by trying to have his way with one of the first-year bonded students who had been given some of the growth potion.

Rubbing his eyes and then pushing his half-moon glasses up the bridge of his nose, Albus Dumbledore looked like a man who was trying to be eminently reasonable while at the same time trying to protect his students, even though the reality was something that was closer to ninety degrees off from that. “Amelia, first let me say that I am as saddened by this as you are, but I can’t just let you try to cart students out of here wholesale so that you can question them ‘downtown’ as Muggles would say. First, I think you’d find that you’d get nowhere with because most all of them didn’t see anything and secondly, because most all of the first through third-year students, particularly this year, are protective of each other and will not ‘give someone up’ as you put it a few minutes ago.”

“Now see here, Dumbledore!” she yelled and slammed her hand on the desk; letting her magic come to the surface, so that her aura was visible.

Suddenly, the ambient light in the room flared like the sun itself and Amelia Bones realized that trying to intimidate the headmaster by putting on a display of power was beyond stupid. While it often worked with low- and mid-level thugs...the ones she usually dealt with....it wasn’t going to work with the person who was, arguably, the most powerful wizard in all of Europe and maybe the world. His magic was flaring all around him; creating a coronal effect that was frightening in its intensity.

The Auror who had been standing silently behind her put a gentle hand on her shoulder and pulled her back, so that she ended up standing a little farther back from the desk than she had been a moment before. “Dumb, Amelia” he said quietly into her ear.

In that instant, Amelia Bones – head of the Ministry’s Department for Magical Law Enforcement for the United Kingdom – realized that she had just tried to play a version of ‘chicken’ with the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards and lost.

“You will leave, Amelia, now. The killing was justified and you know it...and that’s all you need to know. I will not have you harassing my students.”

Amelia Bones couldn't do anything but quietly acquiesce. "Come, Kingsley. There's nothing more for us here" she said, making her way over to the overly-large fireplace/floo-connection.

"Yes, Ma'am" he said politely; before turning his head slightly and winking at the Headmaster.

Albus nodded ever so slightly; amused that his longtime friend had the audacity to do such a thing when his friends' boss was standing right next to him.

Once Madame Bones had left, Johan eased off the wall and walked over to the overstuffed chair near the Headmaster's and unceremoniously dropped himself into it. "That was a risk that you took, Albus. Ballys and worth it, but a risk none-the-less".

Inclining his head, Albus stroked his beard and then said, "Why thank you, Johan. I think that it was time that Amelia learned that she's not the biggest fish in the pond after all."

Chuckling, the long-time potions-master said, "Aye. That's something I'll second. She's always been used to throwing around the fact that she's unusually powerful to get her way and intimidate people. That's great if you're trying for a confession, but not so great when you're trying to get someone's cooperation. I was actually really surprised that she had the audacity to try it on you."

Leaning back and yawning into the crook of his arm, before righting himself, Albus shook his head. "Sorry about that. It was a long night. Are you sure that the rest of your charges got the message clearly?"

Rubbing his own eyes, Johan stifled a yawn and then said, "Oh fuck, I hope so, Albus. I mean....how could you not after what happened? But....I suppose there could be one or two that are really that slow that they wouldn't catch on. Let's just hope that we're not forced to clean up yet another mess before the end of the year."

After a minute or so, Johan broke the silence. "It begs the question, Albus, as to whether or not we're going to continue to pretend that

nothing has changed and that we're not treating the bonded any differently. Pretty much every other student in the school knows now that it's a lie and that the bonded are treated differently – not just because of their bonded status, but because of wizarding law."

"What do you suggest then?"

Reaching into one of the inner pockets of his work-robe, Johan produced a folded document which consisted of three pages. "Here. Lady Potter, along with some others, drew this up, at my request."

The Headmaster looked at the first page and marveled at the detail. "When did they do this? It looks like something that's been worked on for a while."

Smirking, Johan said "Last night, after curfew."

Albus fought down the growing sense of frustration that he hadn't thought of the common-sense changes which were spelled out on the first two pages and realized that being outsmarted by a twelve year-old was more than a little annoying.

As if he could read the Headmaster's thoughts, Johan said, "Annoying isn't it?"

"Not funny, Johan" the Headmaster said; his voice not-so-subtly betraying the fact that his protégé was right, but that it was a moment when it was simply impolite or at least impolitic to speak truth to power.

The Headmaster read and then re-read the document, pausing only twice to make notes in the margins. When he was finished, he looked up at the potions-master. "You know Johan; one might very well assume that others were in the room when this was being drafted. Others who were already graduated from Hogwarts. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"Surely your not implying that I was present, are you Albus? I mean, to cast such aspersions....."

Laughing mostly to himself, the Headmaster stroked his beard again with his left hand; taking time to twirl it in between his fingers, before he settled back in his chair a bit. It was a habit that he had picked up once he had started growing it in the late 1970's and had shaken since. Finally he said quietly, "We'll make these changes, Johan, if you feel that they are the right ones to make. However, it means that we're going to have to move Kettle out of his position in the bonded dorm. I'd like to put you and your wife into that position."

The long-time head of Slytherin thought about that and what it would mean for the politics and the dynamics inside the infamous house before he simply nodded and said, "We'll do it."

"Good. It's settled then. We'll move Remus into your old position, with your blessing."

"The wolf in charge of the snakes. That's going to shake things up" he snorted.

"That it will, my friend. That it will."

"We done then?" Johan asked as he started to rise from his chair.

The Headmaster waved a hand in the direction of the door. "Aye, we're done. Go do what you have to. Let Remus know that I need to see him. I want to tell him myself what we're planning."

"Very good, Headmaster. I will find him immediately."

Once he was all the way to the inner door, he turned. "Thank you, Albus."

The ancient wizard looked at him from across the room and suddenly felt the pang of guilt that always accompanied the ongoing deceit of the lie he was living. "You're welcome, my friend" he said quietly.

Slytherin 7th year common room, an hour after dinner

Alythia Black, niece of Arcturus Black and his squib brother's only daughter, was a witch not to be denied, which was something that everyone seemed to know, including Sefford Hatton. The only difference between the two was that while Alythia paraded her anger and frustration in front of anyone who would listen, Sefford was quiet and reserved.

At the moment, Alythia was acting out every death-eater's dream by complaining about how the pure-bloods (of which she was one, even though her father was a squib and had been disavowed by the Black family) were now not allowed to dominate the school because of the Headmaster's new pet project. In reality, she was just having fun creating mayhem and trashing the 7th year common-room. Not only was she throwing things around the room, she had gotten to throw some wandless, silent curses around at the doorways and other places which would forever consternate unwary future Slytherins; all the while using the cover of yelling about how it was completely unfair that they were going to have to 'toe the line' or risk expulsion because one really, really stupid Slytherin had decided to try to 'try out' one of the bonded third-year girls and had been killed for his stupidity. Sefford watched with some amusement as she made it known to everyone present that she shouldn't have to play all nicey-nice simply because a boy couldn't keep his pants zippered.

"You done yet, Alythia?" Sefford said with a drawl; his hands rubbing the tiredness from his eyes.

She looked at him; her rant interrupted by his question. "Oh, and I suppose that you're just going to roll over and give in to the Muggle-lover's demands?"; the tone of her voice making her scorn for him obvious.

Sefford put the books that were in his lap down in a neat pile next to the chair and then stood up. Alythia watched him warily, but didn't move quite fast enough with her wand to prevent his next action. "Imperio!" he half-whispered as he pointed his wand right at her chest. Immediately, her wand-hand sagged and he snatched it away. Then he tucked his and Alythia's wands into his pocket and looked at her; a sneer on his face. "You haven't learned very much about being a true Slytherin so I'm going to teach you why I am the one in charge

around here. First though, you're going to take care of a little problem of mine that's been festering all day. On your knees, bitch." Alythia immediately sank to her knees in front of him as the other boys in the room watched. They were all laughing to themselves; knowing full well what was coming next.

Sefford unzipped his pants and then took his meager, laughable self in hand. "Suck me" he said; pushing his erection towards her waiting mouth.

There was a good bit of snickering over the next hour as various boys took their turn with the Slytherin girl. None of them knew nearly as well as the girl at the center of attention, that the only true way to fight off the Imperious curse was to recognize what you were willing to do and what you weren't and channel your magic and your efforts only against the latter. Not one of them knew that while Alythia played the pure-blood bitch, that wasn't who she was or ever had been inside, thanks to her parents diligent teachings, nor did any of them know that she could easily throw off the Imperious curse from anyone but the Headmaster himself. She smiled inwardly at the fact that the only one who was being deceived was the one who thought he was in control of the situation and she laughed at his weakness and the fact that she wasn't going to be the one taken out in chains for using an Unforgivable. It was a delicious irony that her love of sex and her very carefully hidden muggle background and education could be assets in the situation in which she found herself.

Realizing that she had to be careful not to give away the fact that she had thrown off the curse after the first moment, she went back to 'entertaining' the boy who was standing in front of her. It was going to be a long, satisfying evening she knew, and she planned to enjoy every moment of it – before the real show began and the one last threat to her total domination of Slytherin House was eliminated.

The alarm that went off in the Headmaster's office told him the moment that the Imperious curse was used and who used it. It was part of the complex web of charms and enchantments that guarded both students and professors in the school. Merlin looked at it and

remembered the day that he had created the charm which was now ringing so insistently. “Charlus!” he said into the air; knowing that his most faithful elf-friend would answer his call.

“Master?” the diminutive elf said, the moment he appeared.

“Charlus, I need you to go to the seventh-year Slytherin Common-room immediately. Make sure that you can’t be seen. If anyone is being hurt, intervene. Otherwise, report back to me immediately.”

Charlus, as head-elf, was often called to be his master’s ‘enforcer’, so he didn’t hesitate – which was good - because time was sometimes of the essence. Fortunately, it didn’t take long for the extraordinary elf to report back.

“Master? They’s were being bad again. Nasty, evil Hattons was trying to copulate with Ms. Black’s mouth. I was much ashamed in seeing it.”

The Headmaster nodded and then dismissed his elf-friend. He was going to have to do something about Sefford Hatton, and was frustrated that the political chaos had not even begun to settle from Alexander Montague’s death at the hands of more than two dozen of the third-year bonded students.

Merlin closed his eyes and focused his thoughts. “Love? Ego postulo ut sermo vobis” (Love? I need to talk to you)

“Ποια είναι η αγάπη; Ι'll να υπάρχουν σε μια δεύτερη.” (What is it love? I’ll be there in a second” she replied quickly.

Albus/Merlin had just turned towards the beautiful phoenix that had been his companion for more than a thousand years when the woman who had also been his companion for that entire time suddenly appeared next to him. His hand reached out and pulled her to him even as she steadied herself.

“Είναι ελαφρά! “ (“Be gentle!”)

“Pffffffffffffff. EGO sum mitis! Vos es unus usquequaque lascivio ferreus impetro!” (“I am gentle! You are the one always playing hard to get!”)

Margaret, elder daughter of David, of the house and lineage of David, reached out and touched her husbands’ face as she said silently “I love you too. Now let me go and tell me why you needed to see me so quickly.”

His ‘happy-face’ fell away even as he pointed to the desk and to the scroll which recorded any dark magic that might be used in the school. Minerva/Margaret left his embrace unwillingly and moved over to the desk, so that she could read what had been recorded there. Her eyes trailed down to the most recent entry and her jaw dropped open in shock. Merlin moved in behind her; touching her shoulder so that she’d know he was behind her. “What are you going to do about it?” she asked.

“I wanted you to know about this before I called Johan down from his office and called Amelia back. We may have to go in and take him out by force. Use of an Unforgiveable will put him behind bars for the rest of his life – which you and I both know will be less than a year.”

Minerva/Margaret felt a powerful wave of sadness for the young man whose life had just ended, whether he knew it immediately or not, and there was moment during which she had a difficult time holding her assumed form. She was grateful that there was no one else around to witness her momentary reversion, because she hated obliterating people.

One half-hour later, in the Slytherin 7th-year dorm

Alythia Black looked around in satisfaction. All of the boys whom she had been ‘entertaining’ were passed out in various states of dress around the common-room. Sefford Hatton was splayed out on a chair near the fireplace; his zipper half-done up and there was stupid grin on his face as he slept. For her part, the only thing truly wrong with her was that her jaw hurt and her knickers were a soggy mess. She had serviced eight boys and in so doing had rolled through three

moderately-satisfying orgasms herself, thanks to her own ministrations and a powerful imagination.

Standing up, she dusted off her dress and was just turning to gather her wand back when she felt the unique tingle that she always felt when there were witches or wizards much more powerful than her in the room. Turning, she saw Johan Snape, Amelia Bones, another Auror whom she didn't recognize, and the Headmaster himself. The surprise that she felt at seeing them so soon washed over her and she forced three calming breaths before trying to speak to them.

"Are you all right?" Snape said more gently than she might have ever expected.

"Yes, I think I am" she said truthfully. Lying to Snape was futile she knew. He always knew when a student was lying and there was no point in trying to act all hurt in front of him.

Snape signaled to the female Auror. "Go with the Auror here. She will take you to St. Mungo's, where you will be checked over."

Better and better! Alythia thought to herself happily. It was going to be a loooooong night for her tormentors – made easier for her since she wouldn't have to be around to see it or defend herself to the rest of the seventh-year students.

"Come with me" the Asian-looking Auror said; taking her hand and leading her away from the scene. Alythia started walking towards the doorway when she was stopped by her head-of-house. His voice was low and sibilant, but not uncaring. "Be careful. You're going to make some real enemies tonight. When you return, find Potter. He'll protect you in ways I can't."

Alythia nodded and squeezed his arm before the Auror by her side drew her out of the room.

Once she was gone, Amelia Bones turned to the Headmaster. She was furious with him still, but knew her duty and didn't let their earlier confrontation cloud her judgement. "Alright, Albus. Which one?"

The Headmaster pointed towards the young man who was sleeping soundly near the fire; his legs spread out in an almost obscene manner and the smug, satisfied grin still on his face. Amelia spied the two wands that were sticking out of the boy's right-hand pocket and snatched them up. Once the two wands were secure, she put the boy into a full body-bind and woke him up. His eyes snapped open in sudden panic and he looked around, as only his eyes were able to move.

"Sefford Hatton, you are under arrest for use of an Unforgivable Curse and for first-degree sexual assault. You will be taken to the Tower of London tonight, where you will await trial."

The Headmaster could see the panic and terror that the words Tower of London induced in the boy and he truly felt sorry for him....but he was wise enough to know that it is one's choices in life that make people who they are and that Sefford Hatton had made a very, very poor choice. The other boys in the room had mostly likely participated in the rape as well, but that would come out in time, he was sure, so there was no need to do a wholesale culling...yet.

"Will you test the two wands tonight, Amelia? I'm almost certain that one of those that you're holding belongs to Ms. Black."

Caught off guard and taken from her immediate train of thought, the head of the DMLE turned to the Headmaster and then said more softly than he was expecting, "Oh...oh, of course, Albus. I'm sorry. You caught me off-guard. I will be certain to get her wand back to her tonight, one way or the other."

"Very good then. Are we done here? Let us bring Mr. Hatton with us and you can deal with him as you need to once we're in my office."

Snape looked at all the seven remaining boys and made sure to memorize each face. He knew that it was more likely than not that not one of them would be continuing into his final semester – which meant no N.E.W.T's – and he wondered whether it was a good thing or not. No N.E.W.T's usually meant few if any job prospects – at none that were not created by the individual. The Ministry, for what little it

was worth, would never hire someone who didn't have at least...at a very, very minimum, two N.E.W.T's.

The seven boys could not meet, or would not meet, their head-of-houses' gaze – which didn't stop the man from glaring at them and saying, so each of them heard it, "I will be back shortly...for a discussion of tonight's events." Then he turned and followed his Headmaster and the head of the DMLE out the doorway, along with their prisoner.

Tuesday, November 19th – Breakfast in the Great Hall, Hogwarts

From the uproar in the Great Hall, it was obvious that Mr. Hatton's arrest and removal to the Tower of London had been picked up on by all of the major magical papers in the United Kingdom; chief among them, The Daily Prophet. Its article though, a one-paragraph blurb 'below the fold', along with a stock picture of Amelia Bones which appeared to have been taken at an official meeting of the Wizengamot the prior year, was the shortest of all the articles printed, as well as the least informative. The Quibbler, on the other hand, had missed the event in its entirety - much to Luna's frustration - which left her to stew on the coverage which the other papers gave to the matter.

As Harry looked around, he saw that the end of the Slytherin table which was usually dominated by the 7th year boys and girls was particularly empty. The only 7th year boy who was present was the boy with whom he knew Nymphadora Tonks was currently involved and the only Slytherin girl who was present was one of Snape's own nieces.

"Did you see who's missing?"

Hermione was not one to miss things and she had followed Harry's private thoughts as he had scanned the long Slytherin table. "Yes I did. Johan doesn't look happy. I wonder how much he'd be willing to tell us about what's happened."

She laid her head on his shoulder; disregarding the bits of food on her plate for the moment. "How much do we really need to know? I mean...it's not exactly our house and it's not like we don't have our own issues."

Harry felt a wave of tiredness that he didn't expect as he thought about the whole Slytherin situation. "I'd take us back to bed if we didn't have to get to class this morning. I'm not sure I'm up to dealing with all of this, this morning."

Hermione sighed and then realized that she felt the very same way. She wondered if it wasn't the tremendous physical growth which they had both experienced which was finally catching up with them. Shaking her head, she realized that they had both been working tremendously hard recently and that it wasn't the physical growth that was a problem, but rather their mental growth. The study groups which they had been either leading or participating in had forced them both to stretch their mental as well as magical muscles tremendously and neither of them had gotten much 'down time'.

Harry, for his part, agreed with his wife that they were going to have to make a greater effort to get 'off-time' together, when they could recover, but worried that perhaps there were things going on in the school about which he wasn't sufficiently aware and that his ignorance about those matters might come back to haunt him later on.

To the right of where all the bonded sat was the Gryffindor table and near the end closest to the staff table, Minerva McGonagall wandered slowly from lap to lap in her cat-form. It was a chance for her to listen to what the students were saying to each other, as well as an opportunity for her to get some long overdue affection. The girls along the table, in particular, were more than willing to scratch her behind the ears and to give her the love that all cats want, but the boys....her boys...were amazingly gentle and they reveled in the softness of her fur so that every touch, every head-scratch was done with love. "Albus" watched from his high-backed chair as his wife amused herself and thought that perhaps she had the right of it. Interacting with students in such an intimate way certainly did endear her to them and made them see her as much more than just the Deputy Headmistress.

When she was finished her tour, she made her way back up the center-aisle; changing back to her human form as she made it to the dais. There was an appreciative round of applause from the Gryffindor table for her, causing her to turn for a moment and break into a rare, but tremendously warm smile.

The bonded students watched as the Gryffindors applauded their head-of-house and almost every one had the simultaneous wish that their head-of-house, Lawrence Kettle, wasn't a Muggle and could do something equally fun with them.

"Never thought I'd see a professor do that" Harry thought to his wife. "I wish I could become some soft animal that you'd pet for hours."

"Like I do when you put your head in my lap?"

"Exactly" he said, as he squeezed her hand under the table. He didn't see how much they were being watched, nor did he know how deep the decimation of Slytherin would run before matters came to a head.

Friday, December 6, 1991 – 9 AM – Courtroom 1 – Ministry of Magic, London, UK.

"All rise!" the chief bailiff called out, as the presiding justice made his way into the court. By tradition, he wore the white wig and black robes which set him apart from the rest of the judiciary within the Wizengamot's court-system.

Once he had sat down, the bailiff took out a small card and read from it. "Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye! Anyone having business before Her Majesty's court herein come forward and be heard. The High Court of the Wizengamot is now in session. May God save our noble Queen!"

The presiding justice looked down from the bench and said aloud, "Thank you. You all may be seated." Then he turned to his chief clerk and quietly asked her what the docket had in store for them. She

passed him a fairly thick stack of folders; pointing as she did so to the name on the top folder. It was labeled, "R v. Hatton"

"Call it out, then" he said to her quietly.

She stood and looked at the clerks, barristers, and solicitors who were seated in various places around the courtroom and then at the prisoners in the dock. "The Crown calls Regina v. Sefford Hatton."

A tall-ish, heavy-set man with salt-and-pepper hair and an ready, easy smile stood and moved towards the defendant's docket while a tall, extremely graceful young woman with wavy, dark-blonde hair and almost porcelain skin approached the prosecutor's table, carrying a briefcase that was full-to-overflowing.

Isabelle Codnor, the chief clerk of the court, looked up at the presiding justice and nodded her head. He looked out over the court and said, "Would the parties please identify themselves for the record?"

The blonde prosecutor went first. "My lord, may it please the court, I am Alexandra Bell for the Crown."

"Robert Strasnick my Lord, of the firm Andrews, Strasnick, and Caesar, for the defense."

"Very good then. I take it that we are here for final pre-trial motions?"

"Yes, your honor, depending on what my brother has before the honorable court."

A grin crossed the man's face. He'd dealt with this particular prosecutor before and knew that she had something up her sleeve and he wanted to preempt any effort that she might make. Reaching down into the stack of pre-prepared motions, he pulled out the one he was looking for and said, "My lord, if I may approach?"

It was a motion to dismiss that he knew he had to win, or else his case would be nothing but a long, uncertain, uphill slog that could end in an ugly, one-way trip to Azkaban for his client. The clerk took the

copy and handed it to the Justice. Solicitor Strasnick handed a second copy to the prosecution before returning to his place behind the defense table.

After a minute or so of silence, Justice Swan looked down from the bench. He was a no-nonsense type who was often referred to as 'the kisser' because of his penchant for feeding convicted prisoners to the Dementors of Azkaban. "Solicitor Strasnick, I take it from your motion that you feel that your clients' rights were violated because he wasn't read his rights immediately upon his arrest?"

"My lord, if I may be heard on my motion?"

"It's your show for the moment, Solicitor Strasnick. Say your peace."

And he did.

For more than twenty minutes, Robert Alan Strasnick spoke, often in meticulous detail from his supremely organized and copious notes. His words were passionate, but restrained; dignified but direct. He cited more than a dozen cases on point, from both Her Majesty's Court of Appeals, the European Court of Justice in the Hague, and the well-respected U.S Supreme Court and when he sat down, he felt like he might have won the point.

Prosecutor Bell stood and said, "My lord, if I may?"

With a wave, Justice Swan signaled his approval of her request. She began. "Thank you, my lord. If it pleases the court, I wish to point out that under rules adopted in late 1979 by the Wizengamot; rules which have not been repealed, the Director of Magical Law Enforcement may exercise her discretion and authority by making an arrest, if the subject is a flight risk. Since the Hatton family resides full-time in the Republic of Ireland and since Mr. Hatton does, in fact, carry three separate passports – one from magical Britain; one Muggle passport from Her Majesty's government, and the third from the Republic of Ireland, he would have had motive as well as opportunity to flee the jurisdiction. Given that Mr. Hatton has been charged with a capital crime, Director Bones was well within her rights to immediately arrest and detain Mr. Hatton without first reading him rights. I therefore ask

you, my Lord, to deny my brother's motion and remand the defendant to custody pending the outcome of this trial. Thank you."

Justice Swan looked at the prosecutor with a studied expression and then at Solicitor Strasnick. "Solicitor Strasnick, I have heard your motion and though I am very impressed with the detail of your presentation, your motion is denied."

Strasnick's heart sank and he started to sit, when an idea struck him. Rising again, he said "My lord, I object and ask for a stay until I am able to file an interlocutory appeal on this point to her Majesty's Court of Appeals." It was all he could do, given the circumstances.

Justice Swan rubbed the bridge of his nose in either irritation or tiredness and then looked at the able defense council. "Your motion is granted, Solicitor Strasnick. How long will you need?"

"A minimum of thirty days, my Lord, depending on their docket."

Alexandra Bell was rattled. She hadn't expected this particular turn of events. It was all that she could do to keep her voice even and her alarm at the sudden turn hidden. "My Lord, I object."

"Objection noted and overruled, Madame. Solicitor Strasnick will get his stay. However, I am ordering that the prisoner continue being held without bail. He is remanded to the custody of the MLE-London, where he will stay until this matter is concluded."

Prosecutor Bell looked relieved. "Thank you, my Lord."

Albus Dumbledore watched from the gallery as the wheels of justice ground forward. Though he was impressed with the defenses' arguments, he knew that the weight of the evidence would eventually send another student – one in a long line of students, he thought sadly – to Azkaban and to the tender mercies of the Dementors. As he rose from his seat, he saw the look of despair in Hatton's young eyes and wondered whether the boy truly knew what was waiting for him.

He wasn't the only one watching the proceedings, however. Amelia Bones had also been watching as her young protégé went through the process of defending the Crown's right to prosecute, as well as her own actions during the arrest, two weeks prior.

A shadow crossed in front of her and she turned to see who had made it. "Hello Albus" she said softly.

"Morning, Amelia. I'd say 'good morning', but I fear that there's not anything that's good about it."

His voice was pained and it was obvious to her that he was feeling the loss of a student more personally than others were. There wasn't much she could do to ameliorate those feelings, even if she didn't share them herself. "You can't blame yourself, Albus. He made his choice. Using an Unforgiveable on a young woman for something as base as he did....doesn't bode well for any choices that he'd have made in the future, had he not been caught."

"Seems harsh to kill a young man for it though."

She was about to retort that it was life in Azkaban, not the kiss itself, but then she thought about the average lifespan for a prisoner held at the island fortress and realized that it might as well be a death-sentence; considering most prisoners didn't survive much beyond ten to twelve months, let alone ten to twelve years. Amelia put a hand on his arm and said quietly, "I don't like it either, Albus, but it's the law. If we were all Muggles, we'd not be having this conversation, I know, but there's nothing you or I can do about it right now. Someday, perhaps, but not today."

The old man shook his head and as he started to speak, she could hear the frustration and bitterness in his voice. "When are we going to stop saying that and finally realize that the day might have come to actually change things, Amelia? When are we going to stop waiting for something better to happen and actually go out and make it happen?"

Amelia looked up at him and didn't know what to say. That he was right was obvious...but she was far from certain that she had the

courage to change the things – like Hatton’s harsh prosecution and likely death sentence – that needed to be changed.

She watched the Headmaster walk away slowly and wondered if she shouldn’t quietly try to begin galvanizing support for a major overhaul in the way that criminal cases were prosecuted and young people were treated in general in wizarding Britain. It would take a master’s touch – and would require long-term efforts – but if successful, would help to remake the face of English wizarding society.

As she walked the twenty five steps up to the top of the court gallery and made her way to the large outer double-doors, a strategy began to take shape in her thoughts. It would require a figure-head; someone who could inspire the magical community, as well a master-planner/strategist, and finally, someone who could see what the outcome could look like, if the kind of changes that needed to be made were made. She knew that she’d never be anything but a foot-soldier in the effort, but she accepted that with equanimity.

Walking along the corridor which led to the main set of lifts that would take her back to her office, Amelia thought about all the things that were wrong with magical British society and vowed to correct what she could. It would take time – maybe more time than she had been allotted by fate, but it would get done eventually.

Feeling better than she had in a very long while, she walked into the left-hand-most lift and let it carry her back to the top floor and to her office. There was a great deal to do and there was no time like the present to change the world.

This is part one of a two-part chapter that I’m developing. I thought I’d put this up sooner rather than later, as I have a number of other chapters to work on.

As usual, I would ask you to please leave a review. Reader-reviews are the life-blood of this kind of writing and I need/want them no less than the next person. Plus, it gives me a sense of what’s working and what isn’t.

Regards,

the_scribbler

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